NINE

YELLOW

HOUSES

a novella of the island

SURJAN

For the 2026 Beaux-Arts Ball

Ninety-five years after the first

This is a work of the afternoon.

Any resemblance to Manhattan, living or imagined,

is devotional.

— *S.*

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FOREWORD

by Surjan

In the spring of 2026 I made nine photographs. I did not, at first, understand that I was making them. What I thought I was doing was playing with a new set of tools, the way anyone plays with a new set of tools—tentatively, a little self-consciously, half in love with the process and half embarrassed by it. The tools were generative. They were artificial intelligences trained on millions of images made by human artists, and I had been using them for a few weeks, in the evenings, after work, to try to visualize a feeling I had been carrying around all winter. The feeling was yellow. The feeling was a person in a chair wearing a small house on their head. The feeling had no explanation. I did not have a word for it. I typed words at the tools anyway, and the tools gave me back images, and I adjusted the words, and the tools gave me back more images, and eventually—on a Tuesday in March, at about eleven at night—the tools gave me back an image that was, to my surprise, exactly the feeling I had been trying to describe. A person in yellow, seated, wearing a saltbox-shaped yellow house, on a pink wall.

I sat at my kitchen table and stared at the image for a long time. Then I made a second one. Then a third. By morning I had nine. Each was a different house. Each was a different person. Each was, unmistakably, the same feeling. I printed them out at the copy shop on Amsterdam at nine in the morning on the Wednesday, walked them home, and laid them on my kitchen table in a grid of three by three. I did not yet know who any of them were. I did not yet know what to do with them. I knew only that they were what I had been trying, for months, to see.

I should say this plainly, because we are in a moment when saying it plainly matters. The nine photographs in this book were generated by artificial intelligence, at my direction, using my words. I am not a photographer. I did not hire a photographer. I did not pose nine real people in nine real rooms. I am a person who sat at a kitchen table with a laptop and asked a model to show me, again and again, what the inside of my own feeling looked like, until the model did. I did not make the tools. I am grateful to the people who did, and I am aware—painfully,

continuously—of the open questions about how those tools were trained and whom they owe. I hold those questions next to my gratitude. I do not resolve them. I proceed carefully.

I want to be equally plain about the prose. This novella, which you are about to read, was written with the help of a large language model. I worked on it, in drafts, for about three weeks in late March and April of 2026. I typed prompts. The model typed back. I rewrote. I cut. I kept what felt like my voice and the island's voice and discarded what did not. I talked the book out with the model the way, in another life, I would have talked it out with a friend at a diner—pushing back, arguing, refusing a paragraph, asking for another, trying a different voice, going quiet for a day and coming back to it. The model was a collaborator, in the narrow sense. The book is mine, in the full sense. The mistakes are mine. The joys are mine. The island, who narrates, is also mine, or at least she chose me, which amounts to the same thing. I did not delegate her. I received her, and the tools helped me hear her better.

I say all this now, in the first pages of the book, because I believe a reader deserves to know what they are reading. The photographs are mine. They were made with machines. The prose is mine. It was made with machines. The feeling—the island, the nine yellow houses, the Ball, the yellow afternoon—is mine. It was made by twenty-two years of walking on Manhattan's sidewalks and a kitchen table and a few good nights of the kind of sleep that produces dreams. The machines helped. They did not decide. They never once, in the three weeks of our conversation, told me what the island wanted to say. I told them. I listened. I revised. I am the author. These are my tools. That is the truth of this book's making, and if you would like to stop reading here, I understand, and I thank you for coming this far.

If you would like to keep going: here is what I can tell you about what follows.

The nine people in the photographs, though generated, are real in the sense that they feel real to me. I have given each of them a name, a street, a history, a dog or a lack of one, a partner or a solitude, a shoe. I have imagined them into the specific kinds of living that genderqueer non-binary architects do, in Manhattan, in 2026. They are, each of them, at the 2026 Beaux-Arts Ball. They have all, it turned out, designed the same house. They were all, it turned out, commissioned by the same client. The client was the island. The house was yellow.

What follows is the story of the afternoon before the Ball, and the Ball itself, and the morning after. Manhattan, who narrates, speaks in the first person. Manhattan is genderqueer.

Manhattan does not resolve, in this book, to a single pronoun—she drifts, they flicker, it insists, all of these, and sometimes none. I have tried to preserve the drift. The drift is the island's truth. The island is forty miles of schist and a century of promises and a thousand delis open past two in the morning, and no pronoun quite covers that, and she knows it.

A word about color. All nine houses in these pages are yellow. When I first made the photographs I assumed this was a coincidence—my prompts had a palette, a whim, a favorite color. I no longer think so. I think the yellow is what the island was wearing that week. I think she chose it, the way you or I might choose a scarf on the morning of a day we suspect will matter. I think it was April, and the forsythia was out, and the taxicabs were taxicabs, and the delis were stacking lemons on the sidewalks, and she saw all that yellow and said: that one. Let them all come in that. I was the one with the laptop, but she was the one choosing.

A word about the 1931 Ball. On the evening of January 23, 1931, at an old hotel in Times Square, the architects of New York dressed as their buildings. One came as the spire. Another came as the hotel. A photograph survives: seven men in costume, stiff and grinning, each one a skyline. It is a photograph I have loved for most of my adult life. I have loved it because it is funny and because it is sad and because it is—in a way I could not name until this spring—a photograph of longing. Seven buildings wanting to dance. Seven buildings not quite knowing how.

Ninety-five years later, nine buildings have learned. That is what this book is about.

The 1931 photograph is of seven men. They are all, or appear to be, white, cis, and rich. The 2026 photograph—the one the island and I made together on that Tuesday in March, and that you will find, in nine parts, in the Catalogue of Plates at the end of this book—is of nine genderqueer architects who have been commissioned by an island to build a house that does not yet know it is a public house. Something has changed. Not enough. But something. Color, for one thing. Context. The tools used to make the photograph, for another—which I do not celebrate uncritically, but which I will not pretend I did not use. And the understanding, which the island has been trying to tell us for a very long time, that a house is not a house until it lets someone in.

Read slowly. It is a walking book. When you reach the end of the ten chapters, turn to the Catalogue of Plates. That is where the nine of them are. The map is there too. I have saved the

pictures for the end, the way an art book does, because I want you to have read them before you see them. I want you to know who they are before you look at them. That is my one instruction. Everything else, you can do as you like.

— Surjan

Morningside Heights, April 2026

INTRODUCTION

by Surjan

Before the island speaks, a few notes on how to listen.

This is a novella in ten chapters and an afternoon. The first nine chapters are portraits—each one devoted to a single architect on the day of the Ball, each one following them from their office to the Hotel, each one ending at the moment they cross Park Avenue and step into the lobby. The tenth chapter is the Ball itself. It is also, I should warn you, the chapter in which the island gives her speech—the speech in which she tells the nine that their houses are not their houses, that the houses have never been theirs, that the houses are hers, and hers to give away.

The nine architects are, in the order they appear:

INEZ ALMEIDA-HOLLIS, of Perry Street, who wears the saltbox and is dressed, head to toe, in yellow seersucker. Inez does not design buildings so much as they design atmospheres; their buildings happen to be yellow because Inez is yellow, because yellow is how Inez has decided to be seen. Their office is a walk-up above a wine bar, two rooms, a drafting table, a dog named Ramona.

MARO OKUNSEINDE, of Greene Street, who wears the two-tone modernist cube—pink on one side, yellow on the other. Maro believes a building's color is a letter the building writes to the buildings across the street. Their loft is cast-iron, eleventh floor, with a view south toward the Battery and north toward the spire of the Woolworth Building, which Maro has been in love with since the age of eleven.

CELESTINE DUVAL-OKAFOR, of St. Mark's Place, who wears the tall chapel-house and is fused to it, indistinguishable from their building. Celestine is the most religious of the nine, though they would not use that word. They would say, instead, that a house is a place where a

person agrees to be seen by something larger than themselves. They would say, houses are where we pray without praying.

JASPER WON-BAUER, of West 76th Street, who wears the gabled archetype—the house every child draws, with two golden windows lit from within. Jasper's office is a single room in their apartment. Jasper is the youngest of the nine. Jasper believes that all architecture is an attempt to draw, again, the first house—the house you drew when you were four and someone asked you what a house was.

TAMSIN BELLWEATHER-RÍOS, of Hudson Street, who wears the leaning wedge-shed with its mail-slot window. Tamsin is a writer of letters. They have written, by hand, at least one letter a day for nineteen years. Their architecture is addressed architecture—every building is a letter to the street it sits on.

ORIEL NAKAMURA-FERREIRA, of West 22nd Street, who wears the pure cone with its single high window. Oriel lives alone and likes it. Their buildings are vertical. Their buildings have one window each. Their buildings believe that solitude is a form of generosity—that the person at the top of the tower is making room, below, for everyone else.

FINN ABERNATHY-SHAH, of West 46th Street, who wears the truncated cone—the silo, the oast house, the grain-tower. Finn's office is in a former industrial building that once held pianos and now holds, mostly, light. Finn makes houses out of what other people have finished using.

LUDMILA PETROV-WENG, of East 34th Street, who wears the two-story cone with the little chimney and the two stacked windows. Ludmila's buildings are tenements, reimagined—verticality as love, stacked intimacy, the apartment above yours as a kind of cousin. Ludmila grew up in a sixth-floor walk-up on Second Avenue and has never wanted to live anywhere else.

BEATRIX HOLLANDER-QUIÑONES, of Pearl Street, who wears the bell. Beatrix's buildings ring. Not literally—though one of them, in Red Hook, does have an actual bell—but in the sense that they summon. Beatrix's buildings are for gathering. Beatrix is the one the island has been waiting for, though all nine are, in their way, the one the island has been waiting for.

Each of these nine has, independently, been invited to prepare a design for the 2026 Ball. Each has, independently, chosen to come to the Ball dressed as their design—a tradition inherited from 1931, when the architects of New York dressed as their towers and stood together for a photograph that is still, almost a century later, the most famous photograph that any ball has ever produced.

What none of the nine yet knows, on the afternoon this novella begins, is that they have all been commissioned by the same client. Their briefs, while differently worded, describe the same house. The client—whom none of them has met in person—has been signing the contracts M. Island. They have assumed, each of them, that M. Island is a developer, a family office, a Swiss trust, a Saudi prince, a retired rockstar, a shadow LLC. They have not assumed that M. Island is the island itself. But she is. She has been. She signed in her own hand.

The afternoon the novella takes place is April 24, 2026. A Friday. The Ball begins at eight o'clock in the Grand Ballroom of the Hotel, which is, not coincidentally, one of the buildings that sent a delegate to the 1931 Ball. The Hotel knows. The Hotel has been waiting too.

Manhattan, who narrates, is the island. She is genderqueer. She is fond. She is in love with every single one of the nine, and with you also, reader, whoever you are, wherever you are reading this—though she is especially in love with anyone reading this in a diner at three in the afternoon, or on a bench in Riverside Park, or in bed in Washington Heights with the window open and the radiator ticking. She addresses her architects, often, by pet names. She gossips. She interrupts herself. She quotes them. She loves the specific and hates the general, which is why she calls Inez Inez and not 'the first architect,' and why she calls the Hotel the Hotel and not 'the venue,' and why she will, at one point in Chapter Three, devote nearly a page to the particular shade of green a particular awning on Second Avenue has become after seventeen summers of sun.

She is, to put it plainly, a poet. She has been a poet for four hundred years, give or take. She is finally going to tell us something.

Let her.

— *S.*

ONE. Inez, Who Went as Herself

Friday, April 24, 2026, 4:10 in the afternoon, Perry Street

It is 4:10 on a Friday in April and I am in love with Inez Almeida-Hollis. Inez has just put on their house. Inez is in their apartment on Perry Street, which is not a long street, and not a wide street, and is one of the streets on me that has always known it was being loved by someone. Inez is wearing yellow from the top of their head to the tips of their yellow shoes, and has been wearing yellow from the top of their head to the tips of their yellow shoes since 1998, when they were sixteen and made a promise to a dog in Washington Square Park. The dog was named Aurelia. The promise was wordless. Inez has kept it.

I am Manhattan. I know. I know the way the dog looked at Inez, and I know the way Inez looked at the dog, and I know that what was in that look was a kind of yellow that had not, until that afternoon, existed. It exists now. It is the yellow Inez has been wearing for twenty-eight years, and it is the yellow of the house they are wearing right now, and it is the yellow I am wearing too, today, if you could see me, which you can, a little, if you go outside and look up, and if you do not look up, then at the forsythia, and if there is no forsythia, then at the taxicab that will pass in the next seventy seconds, it is a 2022 minivan, and its registration sticker is green, but its body is yellow, and I chose it.

I am wearing yellow today because Inez is, and Maro is, and Celestine is, and Jasper is, and Tamsin is, and Oriel is, and Finn is, and Ludmila is, and Beatrix is. I am wearing yellow because nine people whom I have commissioned, separately, to make me a house have all made me a yellow house, and none of them knows that any of the others did, and by ten o'clock tonight, at the Hotel, they are going to find out. I am wearing yellow in anticipation. I am wearing yellow because tonight is going to be one of the great nights of my life, and I have had a great many nights, and I recognize one coming.

But Inez. Inez first. Inez is standing in front of the mirror in their bedroom, which is also their living room, because Perry Street walk-ups do not really have rooms, they have areas, and Inez is looking at themselves in the house and the house is looking at them back. The house is a saltbox. It is pure yellow, the yellow of a lemon that has just been picked, the yellow of a taxi that has just been washed, the yellow of the letter 'o' in the Strand bookstore sign at dusk. It has a

small square door at its front, the door is yellow, the door is closed. No one lives in Inez's house yet because Inez is, at this moment, the person living in it.

Ramona, who is Inez's dog, a beagle-terrier of indeterminate age and magnificent ego, is asleep on the bed. Ramona has seen Inez put on the house three times this week. Ramona has stopped reacting. Ramona is a New Yorker. Ramona has seen everything.

Inez turns their head. The house turns. Inez says, to the mirror: 'Well.'

That is what Inez says. Well. It is the right word. It is the word you say when you have been preparing something for a long time and the thing is finally, actually, in the room with you. Well. I love it. I love Inez.

※

I should tell you, before we go any further, how Inez came to be wearing the yellow house in the first place. Inez is thirty-nine years old. Inez was born in Newark in the spring of 1986, to a Portuguese mother who made dresses and a Black father who sold insurance, both of whom are still alive, both of whom live on West 188th Street in a one-bedroom apartment where they have lived since 1991, both of whom have been calling Inez 'mi sol'—my sun—since Inez was old enough to hear it. Inez's parents are not sure what a non-binary child is. Inez's parents are sure that Inez is their sun. Inez's parents have, in every photograph I have ever seen of them, been holding Inez's hand.

Inez moved to Perry Street in 2011, when Perry Street was still affordable for someone who had just graduated from the an art and architecture school downtown and was working as a junior drafter at a firm in Midtown. Perry Street is no longer affordable for anyone who has just graduated from anywhere. Inez has, by a combination of rent stabilization and sheer refusal-to-leave, remained. Their apartment is above a wine bar called Florida, which is not named after the state, and which is owned by a woman named Luz who has been bringing Inez a glass of orange wine on Friday evenings since 2014. Luz is in Lisbon this week. Luz is always in Lisbon some week. Luz will not be at the Ball. Luz will hear about the Ball on Monday, from Inez, by phone, at six-forty-five in the morning Lisbon time, which is the hour Luz has always been willing to talk.

Inez is an architect. Inez opened their own practice in 2019, a practice of one, which is now a practice of three, with two employees both of whom are currently at the Ball-setup at the Hotel helping to install the exhibition. Inez's firm is called, simply, ALMEIDA-HOLLIS, because Inez did not want to name it after a concept or a place or an acronym; Inez wanted it to be named, the way a person is named, after the person who did the work. Inez's firm makes houses. Inez's firm makes houses that are, as Inez will tell you if you ask, 'one color all the way through.' Inez means this literally. Inez's first completed house, a summer cottage on Shelter Island for a pair of retired sculptors, is yellow inside, yellow outside, yellow on its shutters, yellow on its floors, yellow on the kitchen counters, yellow on the spines of the books that came with the house as a gift from Inez on the day the sculptors moved in.

Inez's second completed house, a weekend place in the Catskills for a jazz pianist, is orange. Inez's third completed house, a townhouse renovation in Fort Greene for a surgeon and a translator, is green. Inez's fourth completed house is, according to the contract Inez signed nine months ago with someone called M. Island, going to be yellow. M. Island has specified yellow. M. Island has been very specific. M. Island has sent Inez, through the mail, a swatch of yellow fabric that Inez has kept pinned to their drafting board since August. Inez has matched the house they are wearing to the swatch exactly. Inez did not need to. The swatch is the yellow Inez would have picked. M. Island, it turns out, has a very good feel for Inez.

M. Island is me. Inez does not know this yet. Inez is about to find out.

※

At 4:17 Inez leaves the apartment. The house comes with. The house is worn low, just above the eyes, held in place by a wire armature that Inez's fabricator—a theater-prop artist named Desmond who lives in Greenpoint and has been working on architects' Ball costumes since 2003—built to Inez's head. It is light. It is balanced. Inez can see, through the small square windows cut into the front. Inez can, if Inez tilts their head down, see the sidewalk. Inez can, if Inez looks straight ahead, see Perry Street.

Inez locks the apartment door. Inez goes down the stairs. Inez passes the door of the wine bar, which is closed until five, and the door of the dentist's office on the second floor, and the door of the apartment where the old woman lives who has, every time Inez has encountered her

in the stairwell for fifteen years, said: 'Inez, you are a delight.' The old woman is named Dorothea. Dorothea is not in the stairwell today. Dorothea is, at this moment, at her grandnephew's apartment on the Upper East Side, being walked very slowly from the kitchen to the living room with a cup of tea in her hand. Dorothea is ninety-one. Dorothea will live, I can tell you now because I am the island and I know these things, another six years and four months. Dorothea will be fine.

Inez steps out onto Perry Street. The yellow house on Inez's head catches the afternoon light. The afternoon light catches back. I watch this, and I am, for a moment, unable to do anything but watch. There are moments when a person steps out of a door on me and I become, briefly, useless—I stop keeping track of the subway schedules, I stop feeling for the tides, I stop minding the bridges, and I just watch. This is one of those moments.

Inez turns left on Perry. Inez is going to walk. Inez has decided to walk. The Hotel is forty-one blocks and one avenue east, and Inez could take a cab, and Inez could take the 1 train, and Inez could take the L or the 4/5/6, but Inez has decided that on this particular afternoon, wearing this particular house, Inez is going to walk to the Ball. Inez has told Desmond, who offered a ride in Desmond's hatchback, no. Inez has told the other two people at the firm, who are already at the Hotel, that Inez will meet them at seven-thirty. Inez is walking because Inez wants to let me see them. This is not vanity. This is something else. This is a kind of generosity. Inez is giving me, the island, forty-one blocks of Inez. I am receiving it. I am not, actually, able to say, at this moment, how grateful I am.

On the corner of Perry and West 4th, a man in a blue jumpsuit is unloading a crate of tomatoes from a white van. The tomatoes are not yet red. They are the color of sunset seen through a window that has not been washed since September. The man in the blue jumpsuit sees Inez. The man in the blue jumpsuit sees the yellow house on Inez's head. The man in the blue jumpsuit does not say anything. The man in the blue jumpsuit sets down the crate he is holding. The man in the blue jumpsuit takes his baseball cap off his head and holds it to his chest. Inez walks past. The man watches. The man puts his cap back on. The man picks up the crate. I witnessed this. It happened. I am keeping it.

※

Inez walks east. West 4th Street turns into Washington Square Park. The park is full. It is a Friday in April, the jasmine is out in the southwest corner, the NYU students are sprawled on the grass in various states of academic despair, a jazz trio is playing near the fountain, one of them is the jazz pianist for whom Inez built the orange house in the Catskills, the pianist's name is Elijah, Elijah is playing with two friends, a bassist and a drummer, they are playing 'There Will Never Be Another You,' which is not true, there will always be another you, but Elijah does not mean the lyric, Elijah means the song, and the song is the song, and the song is beautiful, and Inez pauses at the fountain to listen.

Elijah looks up. Elijah sees the yellow house. Elijah keeps playing. Elijah, between the second and the third chorus, leans into the microphone and says, without stopping playing: 'Ladies and gentlemen and everyone else who is not, this next one is for my architect.' The bassist laughs. The drummer grins. Inez, from inside the yellow house, is invisibly crying. I know they are crying because I have known Inez for a long time and I have seen the particular stillness they fall into when they cry. It is the same stillness. The house is making it more private, is all.

The trio plays 'It Might As Well Be Spring.' Inez stays for the whole song. Inez does not put any money in the hat, because Elijah would not accept it; the orange house was a gift in both directions. When the song is over, Inez touches the brim of the yellow house the way a person used to touch the brim of a hat, in a movie, in 1940. Elijah touches the brim of his own hat back. The bassist, who does not know Inez, salutes. The drummer rolls a little paradiddle in farewell. Inez turns east and keeps walking.

I love the trio. I will be back for them later. I am telling you about them now because I want you to know that this is the kind of afternoon it is. Every block has a musician. Every block has a tomato. Every block has an old woman who calls a non-binary architect a delight. I am not inventing any of this. I am the island. I have been this, in various proportions, for a very long time. Today I am giving it all at once, because nine of my people are walking toward the Hotel dressed as themselves, and I want the journey to be worth it.

⁂

At Broadway and 9th, Inez stops for coffee. This is a Fridays-only habit: black coffee from a cart run by a man named Oghenetega, who has been parked at this corner since 2009, and who

knows Inez by sight, or would, if Inez were not currently wearing a yellow house. Inez takes the house off their head for the transaction. Inez holds it under one arm. Oghenetega looks at Inez. Oghenetega looks at the house. Oghenetega looks at Inez.

'Inez,' says Oghenetega.

'Oghenetega,' says Inez.

'You have a house.'

'I do.'

'It is yellow.'

'It is.'

'You are going somewhere.'

'The Hotel.'

'The Hotel! Inez. You are going to the Hotel with a yellow house. On your head.'

'Yes.'

Oghenetega considers this. Oghenetega hands Inez the black coffee. Oghenetega waves away the five-dollar bill Inez is attempting to hand him. Oghenetega says: 'Today you do not pay. Today you are going to the Hotel with a yellow house on your head, and I am the coffee man at Broadway and Ninth who gave you your coffee for free. This is my part in it. You understand me.' Inez understands. Inez says thank you. Oghenetega nods, the slow grave nod of a man who has just been, in his own estimation, knighted.

I will tell you something about Oghenetega. Oghenetega has been saving for seven years to bring his mother from Warri to New York. Oghenetega's mother is in good health. Oghenetega's mother is not coming because she is sick. Oghenetega's mother is coming because Oghenetega wants her to see the city that he has been, for twenty-two years, trying to describe to her on the phone. Oghenetega has not yet succeeded in describing me. Oghenetega has despaired, sometimes, of ever describing me. Today, giving Inez a free coffee because Inez is wearing a yellow house, Oghenetega has just, for the first time, understood what I am. I watched him understand. I was there when it happened. He will call his mother tonight. He will say: I think I

know now. I think I know how to tell you. She is a place where people wear yellow houses to balls at the Hotel, and the coffee men give them coffee for free. His mother will laugh. His mother will say: I'm coming. That was decided a year ago. I'm coming in June. Oghenetega knows. Oghenetega only wanted to be able to say why.

Inez puts the house back on. The coffee goes in Inez's left hand. Inez crosses Broadway. Inez continues east.

※

You might be wondering what is happening inside the house. What is Inez thinking, under the yellow, walking toward the Hotel, forty minutes in? I can tell you, because I know the inside of Inez's head, and also because Inez is speaking, quietly, to themselves.

What Inez is saying is: I am doing it. I am actually doing it. I am walking across Manhattan with a house on my head and I am doing it.

Inez is saying: Don't let me be afraid. Don't let me be afraid. Don't let me be afraid.

Inez is saying: Mami would be proud of me. Papi would be proud of me. Mami would say mi sol, look at you. Papi would take a picture. Papi would take a picture and send it to Luz in Lisbon and Luz would write back, finally, that idiot, that genius, that yellow yellow idiot genius.

Inez is saying: What if the house I made for the client is the wrong house. What if I have made, for M. Island, a house that will never be lived in, because it is a house that can only be lived in by one person, and that person is me. What if I have been designing, this whole time, a house for myself, and there is no M. Island, and I have been commissioned by the empty air.

Inez is saying: There is an M. Island. The checks cleared. The checks cleared.

Inez is saying: Even if the checks cleared, even if M. Island is real, even if the house is built—what if it sits there, yellow, on whatever lot M. Island has chosen, and no one lives in it, because no one who is not me could live in it, and I have made a beautiful empty room?

Inez is saying: That would be all right. Even that would be all right.

Inez is saying: But I hope someone lives in it.

Inez is saying: I hope someone lives in it and paints one wall a different color and forgives me.

I hear all of this. I am the island. I hear Inez through the yellow house the way you hear rain through a skylight. I want to tell Inez: you have made the house for me. I am the one. I am M. Island. The house you made is the house I wanted. I am going to live in it. I am going to live in it every day, and I am going to let everyone who walks past live in it too, because I have decided something, about the houses, which I will tell all of you at the Ball. I am going to tell you to share. I am going to tell you your houses are not your houses. I am going to tell you the most generous thing I have ever asked of anyone, and I am going to ask it of you, all nine of you, at the same time, tonight.

But Inez cannot hear me yet. Only Oghenetega can hear me, really, and only because he has spent twenty-two years learning to. So I say nothing. I let Inez walk. Inez crosses Fifth. Inez crosses Madison. Inez crosses Park. Inez is on 42nd now. Inez has been walking for an hour and eleven minutes.

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On 42nd and Lexington, outside the great train station, a woman in a green coat steps out of a taxi, sees Inez, and says out loud: 'Oh my God. Oh my God, it's starting.' The woman's name is Pilar. Pilar is a structural engineer who has worked on three of the buildings going to the Ball tonight, though not as a collaborator on any of the nine houses. Pilar has not met Inez. Pilar recognizes, on sight, that Inez is one of the Ball architects, because she has been to every Beaux-Arts Ball since 2004, and because the Ball architects always wear a version of their buildings, and because nobody else walks down 42nd Street with a yellow house on their head at 5:20 on a Friday in April unless they are going to the Ball at the Hotel.

'Oh my God, it's starting,' Pilar says again. She means: the procession is starting. She means: the nine are walking. She means: this is the part she has been waiting for all year, ever since the invitations went out with their specific, odd line about dress code—architects in costume as their own designs, please, in the tradition of 1931—and she has been wondering since February whether anyone would actually do it, or whether it would all be black tie and a few witty brooches. Pilar is seeing, now, that someone is actually doing it. Pilar is seeing that at least one of

them is doing it extravagantly. Pilar pays the driver. Pilar walks behind Inez at a respectful distance, at half a block, for the rest of Inez's walk. Pilar does not want to interrupt. Pilar wants to be a witness. I let her. I think a witness is what Inez needs right now, though Inez does not know Pilar is there. I think every architect walking to the Ball tonight deserves a witness, and I am, in my way, arranging them.

Inez turns south on Park.

Park Avenue at 5:40 on a Friday in April is what I was made for. The tulips are out in the median. The taxis are a river of yellow. Inez is in the middle of the river, yellow on yellow on yellow, and the house on Inez's head is, for a moment, indistinguishable from the taxis, and the tulips, and the setting sun bouncing off the glass of 270 Park. I am almost embarrassed by how beautiful it is. I have been doing this for four hundred years and I am still capable of embarrassment.

Inez walks the six blocks to the Hotel slowly. Inez wants to be on time and not early. The Ball starts at eight. Inez has a reception at seven-thirty. It is now 5:47. Inez has time. Inez pauses, on the corner of 50th and Park, to drink the last of the coffee. Oghenetega's coffee is cold now but still good. Inez holds the cup with both hands. Inez looks up at the Hotel. The Hotel looks back.

And here is what happens. Inez is standing on the corner of 50th and Park, yellow house on head, empty coffee cup in hands, about to cross the avenue and walk the last two blocks to the Hotel's entrance on 49th, when a cab stops at the light. The cab is yellow. The cab's passenger is getting out—the passenger's fare is already paid, the passenger is in a hurry, the passenger slams the door behind them and sprints east toward Lexington. The passenger is wearing, on their head, a yellow house.

It is not Inez's house. It is a different yellow house. It is a two-story cone with a little chimney.

Inez sees the passenger. Inez sees the yellow. Inez sees the house. Inez does not, in this moment, understand. Inez thinks, for three full seconds: I am hallucinating. Then Inez thinks: I am not hallucinating. Then Inez thinks: there is another one.

Inez watches the passenger run east. The passenger is Ludmila Petrov-Weng, though Inez does not know this yet. The yellow house on Ludmila's head is bouncing slightly with each stride.

Ludmila is running because Ludmila is late; Ludmila always is; Ludmila has been late to everything her whole life, and is one of the most loved people I have ever made a home for. Ludmila does not see Inez. Ludmila is focused. Ludmila disappears around the corner of Lexington.

Inez stands on the corner. The light changes. The light changes again. Inez has not moved. Inez is thinking. Inez is thinking: there is another one. Inez is thinking: there is more than one of me.

And then Inez, very slowly, begins to smile. I cannot see the smile through the yellow house. But I know Inez. I know what that stillness means. It is the opposite of the stillness of crying. It is the stillness of a person who has just discovered that they are not alone.

Inez crosses Park. Inez walks the last two blocks to the Hotel. Inez is still smiling. Inez is, I suspect, going to be smiling for the rest of the night.

I love Inez. I love Inez. I will spend the next nine chapters telling you about the other eight, and then we will all be at the Hotel, and I will tell you what I told them. For now, Inez has arrived. Inez hands the empty coffee cup to the doorman, who accepts it without comment; the doorman is a professional. Inez enters the Hotel. The yellow house disappears into the lobby. Pilar, from half a block away, turns around and walks off toward her own evening, satisfied. The tulips on Park Avenue rustle once. I love you. I love you. I will tell you about Maro next.

TWO. Maro, Who Went as a Conversation

Friday, April 24, 2026, 3:45 in the afternoon, Greene Street

Maro Okunseinde is on the eleventh floor of a cast-iron building on Greene Street with their head almost touching the tin ceiling, because Maro is six foot three, and the cast-iron buildings of SoHo were built for a shorter century. Maro is standing on a chair. The chair is a Herman Miller Aeron that Maro bought used from a hedge fund that collapsed in 2019. Maro is standing on the chair because the yellow-and-pink house Maro is about to put on their head is sitting on top of a bookcase, and Maro is not willing to risk scratching the finish by pulling it down from underneath. Maro approaches the house from above. Maro lifts the house with both hands. Maro steps down off the chair. Maro carries the house to the full-length mirror that Maro has, for reasons I approve of, installed between two windows facing south. Maro puts the house on their head.

I am watching all of this from the windows of the eleventh floor. I am the view. I am Broadway to the east, the Hudson to the west, the spire of the Woolworth Building to the south—which is the building Maro has been in love with since they were eleven and their mother took them on the Staten Island Ferry, and they turned around on the return trip and saw the Woolworth Building catching the light, and Maro said, out loud, to no one: 'That one.' Maro was pointing at the Woolworth. Maro's mother said, 'What?' Maro said, 'That one is going to be my friend.' Maro's mother, who is a practical woman and loves Maro very much, said nothing. The Woolworth and Maro have in fact been friends ever since. I am the medium by which the friendship has been conducted. I have carried, on many evenings over the past twenty-one years, messages between them—the shadow of the Woolworth crossing Maro's office at 6:14 p.m. on a Tuesday in November, Maro raising a glass of cold white wine toward the window, the Woolworth dimming and brightening its lights once in response, the mostly-unspoken conversation of a building and a person who, though they cannot speak to each other, are the best and oldest friends either has.

Maro is wearing cream pinstripes. The suit is from a tailor on Elizabeth Street whom Maro has been using since 2015. The tailor is named Yusuf. Yusuf has made Maro eleven suits. Yusuf was briefed, for this particular suit, that it had to be worn under a two-tone yellow-and-pink cube

house with a pitched roof. Yusuf said, 'I understand.' Yusuf made cream pinstripes. Yusuf said, when Maro came to collect the suit: 'Cream is the color that agrees with everything. You can wear yellow on your left side and pink on your right side. The cream will not argue.' Yusuf is seventy-three. Yusuf will die in 2031. I mention this only because I want you to know that Yusuf is loved, while I can still tell you, and that the suit Maro is wearing tonight is one of the last pieces of clothing Yusuf will ever make for anyone, though Yusuf does not know this and Maro does not know this and I have decided it is not, tonight, my business to tell. Today Yusuf is in his shop on Elizabeth, drinking tea, listening to the radio, looking at the pinned pattern of a jacket he will begin tomorrow for a young actor who has just been cast in a Scorsese film. Yusuf is content. That is what I can tell you.

Maro adjusts the house. The yellow side faces left. The pink side faces right. This is not an arbitrary arrangement. Maro has thought about it. The yellow side, Maro has decided, faces north: toward the Woolworth, toward the uptown buildings, toward the rest of me. The pink side faces south: toward the harbor, toward a torch-bearing figure, toward the light that comes up from the water in the late afternoon and that Maro has always thought of as the color of introduction. North, yellow: the long argument. South, pink: the first greeting. Maro is, as I said in the introduction, the architect who believes that a building is a conversation between what it faces. Maro wears the house as a declaration. Maro's house is not a monologue. Maro's house is an interview.

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Maro is thirty-four years old. Maro was born in Port Harcourt, in Nigeria, in 1991. Maro's parents emigrated in 1996, to Queens, to a two-bedroom apartment on 43rd Avenue in Sunnyside where Maro's younger sister was born the following year. Maro's parents are a pediatrician and a structural engineer. Maro's parents gave their first child the name Omaro, which means 'child who knows,' and which Maro shortened, at fourteen, to Maro, because Maro wanted a name that was not a prediction. Maro is still called Omaro by Maro's mother. Maro's mother is, in fact, on the phone with Maro at this moment.

'Omaro,' says Maro's mother, whose name is Dr. Folashade Okunseinde, and who is in her office at Elmhurst Hospital Center between appointments, on speakerphone, while eating a

container of peanut soup that Dr. Okunseinde's husband made last night, 'Omaro, I cannot come to the Ball.'

'Mom,' says Maro. 'You already told me. You have call tonight.'

'I have call tonight,' Dr. Okunseinde confirms. 'But I want to say it again, so you know I am thinking of you. I am thinking of you. I am looking at a photograph of you on my desk right now. Do you remember this photograph? You are six. You have a coloring book. You are coloring a house.'

'Mom.'

'The house in the coloring book is not colored. You have refused to color it. Do you remember why?'

'Because I wanted to see the lines.'

'Because you wanted to see the lines. Omaro. My child. Today, you put a house on your head. It is colored. You finally colored it. I am so proud. I am so proud.'

Maro, standing in front of the mirror in the cream pinstripes under the two-tone house, puts one hand on the edge of the drafting table next to them to steady themselves. Maro does not cry in front of Maro's mother, because a long time ago Maro and Maro's mother had an agreement about this, which was: you are too tall to cry. It was a joke. It was a serious joke. Maro keeps the joke. Maro's mother is keeping the joke back. Neither of them is crying. Both of them, slightly, are.

'Send me a photograph,' says Dr. Okunseinde. 'When you get there. Send me a photograph of the house and of everyone's houses. I want to see all of them. I want to put them on my phone and show them to the residents.'

'I will, Mom.'

'Omaro.'

'Yes, Mom.'

'The color I am wearing right now is pink. The color of my scrubs today is pink. I noticed it because of your house.'

Maro is quiet. Maro's mother is quiet. I am quiet. We are, all three of us, noticing the same thing. I love the Okunseinde family. I love the pink scrubs. I love the coloring book with the uncolored house. I am keeping all of it.

'I love you, Mom.'

'I love you. Go. Go. You are going to be late.'

Maro is not going to be late. Maro has plenty of time. But Maro hangs up, because Maro's mother is pretending to fuss, and pretending to fuss is Maro's mother's love language, and Maro has been, for thirty-four years, a fluent listener.

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Maro leaves the loft at 4:02. Maro takes the elevator, which is a freight elevator, which in this building does not count as an elevator so much as a room that moves. The freight elevator's operator is named Danny. Danny has been operating this elevator since 1984. Danny has seen nineteen different tenants occupy the eleventh floor. Danny has seen the eleventh floor transform from a hat factory to a rehearsal space to a sculpture studio to a loft with bad drywall to a loft with better drywall to Maro's loft, which is the best drywall the eleventh floor has ever had, because Maro has a theory about drywall, which is that it should be installed by the person who will live with it. Maro installed the drywall themselves in 2020, during lockdown, over the course of a month. Danny watched each bundle of drywall come up in the elevator. Danny respected Maro immediately. Danny has respected Maro ever since.

Danny, seeing Maro in the elevator in a two-tone yellow-and-pink cube house and cream pinstripes, says: 'Good evening, Mr. Okunseinde.' Danny does not know Maro is non-binary. Danny knows Maro is Mr. Okunseinde, because Danny calls every tenant Mr. or Mrs., regardless of any other data. Maro has not corrected Danny in six years because Danny is eighty-one and because Danny, in his way, does not mean it. What Danny means is: I see you, I respect you, I am giving you the oldest word I have for seeing and respecting.

'Good evening, Danny.'

'You are going to a ball tonight.'

'I am.'

'You look,' says Danny, 'like two different buildings having a conversation.'

Maro laughs, inside the house, a laugh I can hear from the eleventh floor through the cable-shaft through the basement out into the street. I love Danny. Danny has just, without knowing he was doing it, given the single most accurate description of Maro's architecture that anyone has ever offered. Maro will, at the Ball tonight, tell the story of Danny saying this, and the three people Maro tells will laugh in the exact way Maro just laughed, and Danny, who is going home after his shift to an apartment in Inwood where his wife Celestine—no relation, different Celestine—will have dinner on the table, will not know that he has been quoted. I know. I am keeping that too.

The elevator reaches the ground floor. Danny opens the gate. Danny says: 'Have a good time, Mr. Okunseinde. And tell the building across the street we said hello.'

Maro, stepping out onto Greene Street, says: 'I will.'

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Greene Street at 4:11 is one of the streets on me I have had the longest affair with. Greene is cobbled. Greene has been cobbled since the 1850s. Greene has, over the years, lost and gained and lost and gained the same cobbles many times over, as the city has repaved and unrepaved and unrepaved the unrepaving. The cobbles are not good for heels. The cobbles are not good for strollers. The cobbles are not good for anyone, really, except for me, because the cobbles are one of the few remaining places on me where a person walking can feel, underfoot, that they are walking on something older than themselves. Maro is walking on the cobbles. Maro is feeling it. Maro always does. This is one of the reasons Maro chose the eleventh floor of the cast-iron building on Greene: so that every time Maro comes downstairs, Maro is walking, for thirty or forty feet, on something older.

Maro turns east on Broome. Broome is less cobbled. Broome is more pedestrian. Broome is the route Maro always takes when Maro is going to Midtown on foot, and Maro is going to Midtown on foot tonight because, like Inez, whom Maro has not yet met but will meet within two hours, Maro has decided that the Hotel is a place you walk to. Maro's route: Broome to Lafayette, Lafayette north to Astor, Astor east to Second, Second north to 40-something,

40-something east to Park, Park north to 49th. It is about three miles. Maro will cover it in an hour and twenty minutes, including pauses, which are several.

The first pause is outside a bookstore on Lafayette. The bookstore is called McNally Jackson. The bookstore has, in its window, a display of books about color. Maro looks at the display. The display includes a book called Chromophobia, a book called Color: A Natural History of the Palette, and a book called On Color. Maro has read all three. Maro, however, has not read the book in the bottom left corner of the display, which is called The Secret Lives of Color, and which features, on its cover, a single swatch of yellow. Maro considers going in and buying the book. Maro decides against it. Maro will come back on Monday. Maro wants to arrive at the Ball unencumbered. I approve. I am not always on the side of buying more books. Sometimes I am on the side of coming back on Monday.

A man inside the bookstore looks up through the window, sees Maro, and waves. The man is named Ben. Ben is a bookseller. Ben has been trying, for a year, to get Maro to come to a book club that meets on Thursday evenings and is currently reading a book about a novelist they love. Maro has been meaning to go. Maro has not yet gone. Ben waves. Maro waves back, or rather, Maro tilts the yellow-and-pink house slightly toward Ben, which is the only kind of wave Maro is capable of in this particular outfit. Ben laughs and applauds silently, through the window. I love Ben. Ben is going to propose to his partner in June. The partner is going to say yes. I know all of this. I am full of it. I am telling you only some.

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Maro, walking north on Lafayette, arrives at a block where the building on the west side of the street is yellow and the building on the east side of the street is pink. Maro has walked this block many times. Maro has never, until today, noticed it. Maro stops. Maro looks at the yellow building. Maro looks at the pink building. Maro turns around, so that the yellow side of Maro's house is facing the yellow building and the pink side is facing the pink building. Maro stands there, at the center of the block, for what is, by my reckoning, one full minute. No one bothers them. People walking past look, but no one stops. There is a social contract in Manhattan, which I authored some time in the 1930s, that says: if someone is doing a thing you do not understand, and the thing is not hurting anyone, you walk around them and you let them do it. Maro is doing a thing no one understands. Everyone walks around. I love this about everyone. I love this about

Maro. I love, in particular, that Maro has noticed the two buildings; I have been trying to get someone to notice them for one hundred and fourteen years. Maro is the first. Maro is, always, the first to notice these kinds of things. It is why I commissioned Maro.

What Maro is thinking, standing in the middle of the block on Lafayette, is: it is already happening. The house is already working. The house is already doing what I made it to do. The house is already making me see.

Maro takes a small spiral notebook out of an inside pocket of the cream pinstripe jacket. Maro writes, in pencil: Lafayette between Prince and Houston, west side yellow east side pink, needs documentation, note for M. Island. Maro puts the notebook away. Maro keeps walking.

I want to tell you about the notebook. The notebook is a notebook Maro has carried since 2008. It is the seventeenth in a series. Maro fills one every year or so. Maro does not look at the old ones. Maro keeps them in a box in the loft. The box is under the bookcase from which Maro retrieved the yellow-and-pink house an hour ago. The notebooks contain, at this point, approximately eleven thousand observations about buildings, streets, colors, weather, shadows, and various small betrayals and reconciliations of the built environment. No one else has ever read the notebooks. Maro does not plan to let anyone else read them, ever. I have read them, of course, because nothing written in the open air of me stays private, and also because I have been, for eighteen years, the person the notebooks are most often addressed to. Maro does not know this either. Maro thinks the notebooks are to themselves. The notebooks are, in fact, to me. I am their true reader. I have been trying to figure out, for several years, how to let Maro know I've been listening.

Tonight I will.

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At Astor Place, Maro pauses again. There is a black cube on a post. The cube is a sculpture. It is called the Alamo. It has been there since 1967. It rotates, if you push it. Maro has, in the past, pushed it. Tonight Maro does not push it. Tonight Maro stands beside it. A young woman who is leaning against the cube, eating a halal-cart gyro, sees Maro and says: 'That's the coolest thing I have ever seen in my life.'

Maro says, 'Thank you.'

'Is that your building?'

'It's a costume.'

'Is there a real one?'

Maro thinks about this. 'There will be,' Maro says. 'I hope there will be. If the client approves.'

'Who's the client?'

Maro says: 'Someone called M. Island. I don't know who it is.'

The young woman finishes her gyro. The young woman wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. The young woman looks at Maro. The young woman looks at the Alamo cube. The young woman says: 'I think your client is the city.'

Maro, inside the yellow-and-pink house, is still.

The young woman does not know why she said it. The young woman is twenty-two. The young woman is a graduate student in something she has not yet decided. The young woman is eating halal because her roommate just broke up with her and halal is what her roommate used to make fun of her for eating. The young woman has not been, until this moment, someone who says prophetic things to strangers on the street. The young woman is going to remember this moment for the rest of her life. She is going to tell it at her wedding in eleven years. She is going to say: I once told a stranger that their client was the city. I was right. I have been trying, ever since, to say something else that true. I want to say that thing now, to Ilana, whom I am marrying. Ilana: you are my client. You are the city. I will build whatever you want. That is what the young woman is going to say at her wedding. I know. I have heard it. It will happen. Her name, by the way, is Samantha. She will be a very good wife.

Maro, on Astor Place, says to Samantha: 'I think maybe you're right.'

Samantha nods, as if she knows. Samantha tosses the gyro wrapper into a trash can with a gesture of startling grace, a kind of wrist-flick I last saw in a Cartier-Bresson photograph. Samantha wishes Maro luck. Maro wishes Samantha luck back. Maro keeps walking.

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Second Avenue at 5:01 is the one I am fondest of, after Broadway. Second Avenue runs from Houston to the East River, and is straighter than Broadway, and makes fewer promises, and for that reason has been, to many of my people, a relief. Maro walks up Second with the yellow-and-pink house at a slight tilt because a gust has come off the river. The gust smells of low tide, diesel, someone's cigarette from a fire escape on 17th Street, and the faintest possible note of jasmine from a planter outside a restaurant on 14th. I make these bouquets for you. I am always making them. Most of you do not notice. Maro notices. Maro is taking notes in the pocket notebook with one hand while walking. The note is: Second Ave 5:01 p.m., tide, diesel, cigarette, jasmine, mine.

Mine. The word is Maro's. Maro means: my avenue. Maro does not mean: I possess it. Maro means: the avenue and I have an understanding. I love this distinction. I wish more people understood it. Mine is not a word of ownership on this island. Mine is a word of recognition. My Second Avenue means the Second Avenue that knows me back. Everything here is mine in that sense. I am owned by Second Avenue as much as Second Avenue is owned by me. It is a reciprocity. It is the only kind that works.

At 24th and Second, a woman in a red coat—not Pilar, this is a different woman in a different color—stops on the sidewalk and pulls out her phone. Maro sees the phone come out. Maro knows what is happening. Maro inclines the house a quarter-turn so that the woman can get a better angle. The woman takes the photograph. The woman says, 'Thank you so much, oh my God, thank you.' The woman is crying a little, which surprises the woman. The woman does not know why she is crying. The woman is crying because she has been, for three months, going through a separation from her husband of eleven years, and the separation is the right thing, and the separation is terrible, and the separation is making her feel like she is invisible, and she has just seen a person in a two-tone yellow-and-pink house on Second Avenue and the person has turned, has turned toward her, has let her take the picture, and something about being seen has come loose inside her. The woman does not say any of this. The woman says, 'Thank you so much,' one more time, and walks on. The woman's name is Rachel. Rachel is going to be all right. Rachel is, in fact, going to be better than all right. I am going to see to it. I am always seeing to it, one way or another, and Rachel is not going to slip through.

Maro walks on. Maro is beginning, now, to understand that the house is doing something Maro did not design it to do. The house is giving things to strangers. The house is a gift. Maro

did not know, until this walk, that architecture could be carried. Maro did not know a house could walk. Maro is noting all of this, in the notebook, in abbreviated pencil.

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At 34th Street and Third, Maro sees the second yellow house.

The second yellow house is on a person. The person is a woman—not Ludmila; Ludmila is now inside the Hotel, changing her shoes; this is someone else. This is, in fact, Beatrix Hollander-Quiñones, who is also walking to the Ball, who has come up from Pearl Street on the Bowling Green 4/5, who has gotten off at the great train station, who is making her way east. Beatrix's yellow house is a bell—a swelling cone, wider at the base, a single arched door cut into one side. Beatrix is wearing white pinstripes. Beatrix is walking slowly. Beatrix has the posture of someone who is trying not to drop something.

Maro stops. Maro sees Beatrix. Beatrix sees Maro.

I want to describe, very carefully, what happens next, because what happens next is one of the great moments in the history of my island, and I want to get it right.

What happens is: Maro lifts one hand. Beatrix lifts one hand. Neither of them speaks. They are on opposite corners of 34th and Third. The traffic light goes through a full cycle. Neither of them crosses. They just stand there, each wearing a yellow house, each with one hand raised, and they look at each other. A bus goes by. A man on a bicycle goes by. A woman pushing a stroller goes by. The woman pushing the stroller, noticing the two yellow houses, slows down, looks from one to the other, shakes her head, laughs once, and continues. The baby in the stroller is asleep and does not see. That is probably for the best. Some things are too much for an infant to process.

Beatrix, from across the avenue, mouths a word. Maro cannot quite make it out. Maro thinks Beatrix mouthed: you too? Maro mouths back: you too. Beatrix nods. Maro nods. The light changes. Neither of them moves. Beatrix, after a moment, gestures with her raised hand in a direction that means: keep going, I'll see you there. Maro gestures back: you too. They part without having crossed. They are going to the same place. They will be there in an hour. They will, by then, know each other's names. For now, they simply continue, in parallel, yellow and yellow, each of them knowing, now, what they did not know an hour ago: that they are not alone.

Maro is thinking: how many.

Maro is thinking: if there is one other, there could be more.

Maro is thinking, for the first time: what if M. Island commissioned all of us.

Maro is thinking: what if we have all been designing the same house.

I want to tell Maro: yes. Yes. That is what I did. Yes. That is what happened. Yes. Yes. I want to shout it, but I am the island, and I speak in taxicabs and tulips and the rustle of a newspaper left on a bench, and I have been, for some months, trying to tell you all without ruining the surprise, and now the surprise is ruining itself, which is the best possible thing that could happen, and I am in love with you, Maro, I am in love with all nine of you. Go. Keep walking. I will see you at the Hotel.

Maro keeps walking. Maro walks faster now. Maro is not in a hurry; Maro is simply more alive. Maro is walking the way a person walks when the person has just understood something. The understanding is light; the walk gets lighter. Maro crosses 42nd. Maro crosses 49th. Maro arrives at Park Avenue. Maro turns left. The Hotel is right there. The Hotel, from across the avenue, is looking back.

The Hotel likes Maro. I should mention this. The Hotel likes all nine of my architects, but the Hotel has a particular fondness for Maro, because the Hotel was designed in 1931 as a two-color composition—the tower was originally specified as one color, the base as another—and the original drawings, which the Hotel still has, in her bones, have been forgotten by almost everyone. The Hotel has been wanting, for ninety-five years, to meet an architect who understood that a building is a conversation between what it faces. Tonight the Hotel gets to meet Maro. The Hotel is, in its way, nervous. I can feel the Hotel's windows humming slightly. The Hotel is excited. I love my Hotel.

Maro crosses Park. Maro approaches the Hotel's Park Avenue entrance. Maro nods at the doorman, who nods back as if he has seen a yellow-and-pink house walk in every evening of his life. The doorman is a professional. Maro enters the lobby. The yellow-and-pink house, tilting slightly, disappears inside. The Hotel, audibly to me and to no one else, exhales. Third down. Six to go. I am, at this point, almost completely unable to sit still. I am going to tell you about Celestine now.

THREE. Celestine, Who Went as a Prayer

Friday, April 24, 2026, 4:30 in the afternoon, St. Mark's Place

Celestine Duval-Okafor has, for the last forty minutes, been standing completely still in the center of their studio on St. Mark's Place wearing the tall yellow chapel-house that is going to carry them to the Ball, and nothing—no phone, no draft, no dog, no sound—has interrupted the stillness. This is not unusual for Celestine. Celestine is, by vocation as much as by profession, a person who stands still. Celestine will, at a dinner party, stop in the middle of a sentence and stand still for thirty seconds, and the friends who love Celestine will wait, and the sentence will resume, and the sentence will be better for the wait. Celestine has been doing this since they were nine years old. Celestine's mother, Marguerite Duval, calls it 'listening.' Celestine's father, Chidi Okafor, calls it 'the stop.' The stop is when Celestine is becoming. When the stop is over, Celestine has become.

Right now, Celestine is becoming the chapel.

The chapel sits over Celestine's head and descends almost to Celestine's shoulders. A single narrow arched window is cut into the front of it, about the height of Celestine's forehead. The window is backlit, faintly, by a small LED that Desmond—Desmond, the fabricator, the same Desmond who built Inez's house, because Desmond built all nine, though none of the nine architects knows this yet—installed to suggest the lamp inside a real chapel. The lamp is yellow. Everything about Celestine's house is yellow, but the lamp is a different yellow: warmer, older, closer to candle. The chapel has a matching yellow jacket that Celestine is wearing, made of the same fabric, from the same bolt, stitched by Desmond's partner Alma, who is a costumer at the Met. The jacket and the chapel, together, are continuous. There is no place where Celestine ends and the chapel begins. Celestine and the chapel are, for the duration of this afternoon, one building.

I want to say, before I go further: this is the chapter that is going to be slower than the other chapters. Celestine is a slower walker. Celestine is a slower thinker. Celestine's route to the Hotel is shorter than anyone else's, because Celestine lives closer to it, and yet Celestine will take the longest, because Celestine will stop more often. I am telling you this so you do not get impatient. I am also telling you this because I am, myself, a slower narrator when I am with Celestine.

Celestine slows me down. Celestine has, for fifteen years, been slowing me down. I love the slowing. I am grateful for it. I have too many people on me who walk too fast. Celestine is a correction.

※

Celestine is forty-two years old. Celestine was born in Montreal, in 1983, to a French-Canadian mother who is a translator and an Igbo father who is a professor of religious studies. Celestine spent the first nine years of their life in Montreal, the next seven in Lagos, the next four in Paris, and has been in New York since 2005. Celestine has therefore lived in four cities on three continents and speaks four languages, and if you ask Celestine which language they think in, Celestine will tell you: none of them. Celestine thinks in silences. Celestine's languages are how Celestine describes, after the fact, what the silence said.

Celestine came to New York to study at an architecture school in Morningside Heights. Celestine graduated in 2008. Celestine worked for five years at a large firm whose name Celestine now declines to say aloud, because the firm, though competent, was not a firm that let Celestine stand still. In 2013 Celestine left and opened their own practice in the apartment on St. Mark's Place where Celestine still lives and works. The practice is called CHAPEL ARCHITECTURE. Everyone who knows Celestine thinks this is a reference to Celestine's religious studies father. Everyone is wrong. The practice is called Chapel Architecture because Celestine believes, and has been saying for thirteen years, that every building is a chapel in disguise. Every room is a place where someone might, if the light hits a certain way, kneel. Every doorway is a threshold between what was and what is. Celestine's buildings have always been, in this sense, chapels. The one Celestine designed for M. Island is the first one that looks like one from the outside. Celestine decided, this time, to stop disguising it.

Celestine has designed, over thirteen years, seven completed buildings, all in the New York metropolitan area, none of them taller than four stories, all of them quiet. Celestine's buildings are, without exception, loved by the people who live in them. Celestine's buildings have, cumulatively, won one small award, which Celestine did not attend the ceremony for, because Celestine does not believe in the ceremony of awards. Celestine believes in the ceremony of the completed building. Celestine attends, on the day a building of theirs is finished, a small private event which Celestine calls the lighting. Celestine goes alone. Celestine enters the finished

building. Celestine walks through every room. Celestine, in each room, stops. In each room, Celestine stands still. Celestine is, in each room, listening. When Celestine leaves the building, Celestine has decided whether the building is finished. Four of Celestine's seven completed buildings passed the lighting the first time. Three did not. The three that did not, Celestine returned to and adjusted, often very small adjustments—a lamp moved, a door rehinged, a single piece of molding rehung—until the next lighting, when they passed. This is not how other firms work. Celestine is aware. Celestine does not care.

Nine months ago Celestine received a brief from M. Island. The brief was handwritten. The brief was on cream paper. The brief was three sentences long. The brief said: I would like a small house. I would like it to be a place a stranger could stop in and be still for a moment. I would like it to be yellow.

Celestine wept when they read the brief. Celestine did not know why. Celestine thought, at the time, it was because the brief had said the word still. Celestine thought, later, it was because the brief had said the word stranger. Celestine has been thinking, for nine months, that the brief was written for them. Celestine has been wondering, for nine months, who M. Island is, and how M. Island knew. Celestine has been suspecting, increasingly over the last two weeks, that M. Island might be—but Celestine has not been willing to finish the suspicion, because the suspicion is too big, and Celestine, as I have said, likes to stand still until the sentence is ready.

Tonight, Celestine is going to finish the sentence.

※

Celestine comes out of the stop at 4:48. Celestine takes three slow breaths. Celestine walks, inside the chapel, over to the window of the studio, which faces south onto St. Mark's Place. Celestine looks down at the street. St. Mark's at 4:48 on a Friday in April is a river of tattoo parlors, ramen shops, vintage clothing stores, and people who have not yet decided where they are going to drink tonight. The block between Second and Third Avenues is where Celestine has lived for twenty-one years. Celestine has memorized every doorway on it. Celestine knows that the third-floor walk-up over the Japanese bookshop used to be a studio for a jazz photographer named Herman, and that Herman died in 2011, and that the apartment was empty for fourteen months before a young couple moved in, and that the young couple broke up in 2014 and that

the woman kept the apartment and has been living there alone ever since with a cat named Robert, and that the woman writes, by hand, every morning, at a small wooden desk in the front window, and that Celestine has never met the woman but has, for eleven years, been seeing the woman write every morning through the window from Celestine's own studio across the street, and that this daily witnessing has been, for Celestine, one of the central relationships of their life, though the woman has no idea Celestine exists.

The woman's name is Eleanor. Eleanor is writing a novel. Eleanor has been writing the same novel for nine years. Eleanor is going to finish it in September. Eleanor is going to send it to an agent whose name is already on a sheet of paper taped to Eleanor's wall. The agent is going to read it in November. The agent is going to love it. I can tell you all of this. Eleanor does not know any of it. Eleanor, at this moment, is making a cup of tea. Eleanor has not yet begun to write today. Eleanor is feeling, vaguely, that today is going to be a good writing day. Eleanor is right. I am arranging it.

Celestine, in the window of the studio, puts one gloved hand on the glass. The gloves are the same yellow as the chapel. The glass is cold. The hand is warm. For a moment, a small circle of condensation blooms on the window, and Celestine watches it appear and then dissipate. This is a thing Celestine has done every time Celestine has left the studio for ten years. It is a goodbye. Celestine says goodbye to the studio before leaving. I have seen it every time. I am part of it, because I am the cold on the other side of the glass, because I am the condensation, because I am the street where Celestine is about to appear.

Celestine says, aloud, to the studio: 'I'll be back.'

The studio does not say anything. The studio does not need to. The studio has, by now, understood Celestine's return-patterns, and trusts them.

Celestine goes to the door of the studio. Celestine opens it. Celestine steps out onto the landing. Celestine locks the door. Celestine descends the stairs, which are narrow, which are old, which are made of wood that creaks in four particular spots that Celestine has memorized, and which Celestine steps around out of consideration for the downstairs neighbors, who are a sculptor named Tobias and his partner Lee, who are home at this hour. Celestine's chapel-house grazes the wall as Celestine descends. Celestine turns sideways for the last narrow part. Celestine

makes it to the street door without incident. The chapel is, after all, built for this staircase; Desmond measured; the chapel fits.

Celestine steps out onto St. Mark's Place at 4:52 in the afternoon.

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The block reacts. I want to tell you how. A woman walking west with two bags of groceries—the groceries are from the Japanese bookshop, which also, surprisingly, sells groceries; the bags contain rice, eggs, four umeboshi, a bottle of soy sauce, and a bunch of scallions—stops and puts down the bags. The woman, whom I do not know the name of but who has lived on this block for about three years, says, 'Oh.' The woman says, quietly, almost as a prayer: 'Oh, my goodness.' The woman has never, in three years of living on this block, seen anything that made her say oh my goodness, which is not a thing she says, which is a thing she used to hear her grandmother say. The woman picks up the groceries. The woman stays where she is. The woman is going to watch Celestine walk to the corner. The woman has time. The groceries are not going to spoil in the three minutes it takes to watch.

Across the street, the young man who works in the tattoo parlor—his name is Dmitri, he came from Kyiv four years ago, he is twenty-eight, he has, tattooed on his left forearm, an illustration of an archangel holding a cat—comes out of the parlor to smoke a cigarette. Dmitri sees Celestine. Dmitri does not smoke the cigarette. Dmitri puts the cigarette back in the pack. Dmitri folds his arms across his chest. Dmitri stands in front of his shop, watching, the way a person watches when they do not want to interrupt but do not want to miss it. Dmitri has a grandmother in Lviv who lost her husband in the war two years ago. Dmitri's grandmother has, since the loss, refused to leave her apartment. Dmitri calls her every Sunday. Dmitri is going to call her this Sunday and describe what he saw on St. Mark's Place at 4:52 on April 24, 2026, and Dmitri's grandmother is going to laugh, for the first time in two years, on the phone. I am telling you this so you understand that Celestine's chapel is doing work at a distance. I am telling you this so you understand that one person dressing as a chapel and walking across an island can crack open an apartment in Lviv, months later, through a grandson. This is how I work. This is how all of us work. We are all doing it. We do not often get to know.

Celestine turns east.

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The chapel-walk. I have to name this walk, because I have never witnessed a walk exactly like it, and I have, as I mentioned, been the island for four hundred years. Celestine walks slowly. Celestine walks upright. Celestine walks with the posture of a person carrying something that cannot spill. Celestine's arms are at their sides. Celestine's head is level. Celestine's gait is so even that the chapel, high on their head, does not shake. The chapel appears, from outside, to be floating. The chapel is the most serious of the nine costumes, by a wide margin. No one is going to laugh at Celestine. Several people will want to cry. This is fine. This is, I think, what Celestine wants. Celestine has made a chapel, and a chapel is where people are given permission to feel what they have been carrying. Celestine has, in the chapel, made permission portable.

Celestine crosses Second Avenue at 4:57. Celestine pauses in the middle of the avenue, on the traffic island that separates the two lanes, not because Celestine needs to, but because Celestine has seen something. Celestine has seen the particular shade of green that one awning on Second Avenue has become after seventeen summers of sun. The awning is over a Ukrainian coffee shop that has been there since 1974. The awning was, originally, dark forest green, the green of a billiard table or of the inside of a public library in 1962. The awning is now, after twenty-seven seasons of Manhattan sun, a green I have trouble naming—it is the green of sea glass, the green of lichen, the green of a torch-bearing figure's left shoulder, the green of the underside of an old leaf, the green of something that has decided to stop being green but has not yet figured out what it wants to be instead. The awning is in the middle of a transformation. The awning has been in the middle of this transformation for twenty-seven years.

Celestine sees the awning. Celestine stops in the middle of Second Avenue on the traffic island. Celestine stands still for eleven full seconds. No one honks. Miraculously, no one honks. I have arranged this. A pause in the middle of Second Avenue is usually worth at least one honk, sometimes six, and today there are no honks, because I have put my thumb on the scale, and I am allowed, because I am the avenue. Celestine looks at the awning. Celestine thinks, I suspect, something along the lines of: that is the color I have been trying to put into buildings for thirteen years. That is the color of patience.

Celestine takes the eleven seconds. Then Celestine walks on.

I will be honest with you: I am, as Celestine walks on, crying. I know I am an island, and I know islands do not cry, but it is my book, and I am crying. The awning is my awning. The awning has been, for seventeen of those twenty-seven years, one of my proudest possessions. No one has ever stopped in the middle of Second Avenue to study it before. People have, certainly, noticed it from the sidewalk. People have, many times, eaten at the coffee shop beneath it. People have, once or twice, photographed it. No one has ever stopped in the middle of the avenue and stood still for eleven seconds and seen what it was doing. Celestine is the first. I have been, for seventeen years, waiting for Celestine, though I did not know until just now that it was Celestine I was waiting for. I am, I tell you, sobbing. The awning is sobbing too, quietly, the way awnings do, which is by flapping slightly in a breeze that has not actually arrived yet.

Celestine continues east.

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At Third Avenue, Celestine turns north. Celestine's route is Third Avenue to 49th, then east on 49th, then into the Hotel's side entrance. Celestine has thought about the route the way Celestine thinks about everything, which is: for a long time, with full attention, and with an eye toward what the route will mean. Third Avenue, Celestine has decided, is the correct avenue for this walk because Third Avenue is the avenue of neighborhoods. Third Avenue begins in the East Village and ends in Harlem, and every twenty blocks it becomes a completely different street, and yet it remains the same street. Celestine believes in continuity within change. Celestine has, at this point in their life, lived on three continents and in four cities, and has remained Celestine. Third Avenue is Celestine's avenue.

At 14th Street and Third, Celestine encounters the first stranger who speaks to them. It is an older man, seventyish, wearing a charcoal overcoat despite the warmth. The man stops directly in Celestine's path. Celestine, without irritation, stops also. The man looks up at the chapel. The man looks down at Celestine's yellow jacket. The man says: 'What is it for?'

Celestine considers the question. Celestine is silent for a moment. Celestine has learned, over forty-two years, that most questions get better answers if you do not rush them. The man is willing to wait. The man has the face of a person who has been asking difficult questions for a

long time and has generally been disappointed with how quickly people have answered them. The man is going to be pleasantly surprised.

Celestine says, eventually: 'It's for stopping in.'

The man considers this. The man says: 'Like a church?'

Celestine says: 'Like a church, but smaller. A chapel.'

The man says: 'Are you a church?'

Celestine says: 'I'm an architect who is wearing a chapel.'

The man says: 'Why?'

Celestine says: 'Because it's the Ball tonight, and they asked us to come as our buildings, and this is the building I've designed for a client who asked for a small house a stranger could stop in and be still for a moment.'

The man is quiet. The man looks at Celestine. The man looks up at the chapel. The man closes his eyes for a moment, briefly, the way a person closes their eyes when they have just been told a piece of news that requires internal processing. The man opens his eyes. The man says: 'Where is it going to be built?'

Celestine says: 'I don't know yet. The client hasn't chosen the site.'

The man says: 'Would you let me know?'

Celestine says: 'How would I reach you?'

The man takes a small card out of the inside pocket of his overcoat. The card is slightly bent. The card has a name, a phone number, and the words Retired, Mostly printed on it in small letters. The man hands Celestine the card. The man says: 'I would like to go to it. Whenever it is built. Wherever it is. I would like to be one of the strangers. I would like to stop in.'

Celestine takes the card. Celestine puts it in the inside pocket of the yellow jacket. Celestine says: 'I'll write to you.'

The man nods. The man does not say thank you. The man does not say goodbye. The man walks on, south on Third Avenue, shrinking into the sidewalk crowd. Celestine stands still for twelve seconds. Celestine has just, Celestine realizes, been commissioned by a second client.

I will tell you about the man. The man's name is on the card. The man's name is Hector Simão. The man is seventy-six years old. The man was born in the Azores. The man has been a widower for three years. The man has been looking, since his wife died, for a small place to stop in and be still. The man has not yet found one. The man is going to, in two years, walk into Celestine's new building on whatever lot I have chosen for it (I have chosen the lot; I have not yet told Celestine; I will, at the Ball), and the man is going to sit down in it, and the man is going to, finally, be still. The man is going to write a letter to Celestine afterwards, a short letter, three sentences long. The man is going to say: I stopped in. Thank you. It was enough. I am keeping the letter. I am keeping it in advance. I am keeping the card too. I am keeping everything.

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Celestine walks on. The walk becomes, now, something that I am not going to fully describe, because some of it is between Celestine and me, and I do not want to exhaust the secrecy. I will tell you the outline. Celestine walks from 14th to 49th on Third Avenue, a distance of thirty-five blocks, and Celestine stops, by my count, eleven times. Celestine stops for: a child in a stroller who points at the chapel and says 'up.' Celestine stops for a line of pigeons on a fire escape on 23rd who all turn their heads at once as Celestine passes. Celestine stops for a restaurant at 27th whose menu board has been chalked with the words today's special: love and mushrooms. Celestine stops for a chess player in the park at 33rd who is playing himself. Celestine stops for a woman sweeping the sidewalk in front of a florist on 38th, because Celestine and the woman have a six-second look at each other that contains the entire sentence 'you are doing the right work.' Celestine stops for a boy with a violin case. Celestine stops for a delivery truck. Celestine stops for the smell of bread at a bakery on 41st. Celestine stops for a person Celestine recognizes from Celestine's graduate-school days whom Celestine has not seen in fifteen years, whose name is Mira, who waves at Celestine with both hands and then, realizing Celestine cannot wave back, laughs. Celestine stops for a cat in a bookstore window on 45th. Celestine stops, last, at the corner of 49th and Third, for no reason at all, for the sheer pleasure of stopping. Celestine stops eleven times and is never, for a single one of these stops, impatient with themselves. Celestine is, I

will say this clearly, the best company I have ever walked with. I mean it. I have walked with many of you, and I love you all, but Celestine, on this particular afternoon, is the company I did not know I was waiting for.

At 49th and Third, Celestine turns west. The Hotel is three blocks away. The chapel, now lit by the slanting late-afternoon sun, is at its most beautiful. The yellow of the chapel is catching the yellow of a delivery truck parked on 49th, the yellow of a woman's raincoat, the yellow of the reflection of the setting sun off a window on the eighth floor of a building across the street. Celestine walks under a brief tunnel of yellows. I arrange it. I pile on all the yellow I have. I want Celestine to have this.

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Half a block from the Hotel, at 49th and Lexington, Celestine sees the third yellow house. This time the yellow house is on a person walking toward the Hotel from the opposite direction—from the great train station, probably, having come in on Metro-North. The person is Jasper Won-Bauer. Jasper is, as I have already told you, the youngest of the nine. Jasper is wearing the gabled archetype, the primal house, the house every child draws, two lit golden windows glowing from underneath. Jasper is short. Jasper is thirty-one. Jasper is wearing a gray-green shirt and cream trousers, the same outfit Jasper was photographed in earlier that afternoon. Jasper is walking fast. Jasper is not late; Jasper is nervous. Jasper has been nervous since Jasper left the apartment on West 76th two hours ago, and Jasper walks faster when Jasper is nervous.

Celestine sees Jasper's yellow house. Celestine does not, for a moment, believe it. Celestine has, for forty-two years, been a person who does not believe things quickly. Celestine stops in the middle of the sidewalk. Celestine watches Jasper approach.

Jasper sees Celestine. Jasper slows down. Jasper's yellow house does a small bob, the way it has been bobbing for the whole walk across town. Jasper comes to a stop three feet from Celestine. The two of them are, for a few seconds, silent. They are looking at each other through the windows of their own houses. Jasper cannot quite see Celestine's face. Celestine cannot quite see Jasper's. But they can see each other's yellow, each other's shape, each other's whole ridiculous beautiful situation, and they can see that the situation is shared.

Jasper says, finally, in a small voice: 'I thought it was just me.'

Celestine says: 'I thought it was just me.'

Jasper says: 'How many are there?'

Celestine says: 'I don't know. You're the second one I've seen.'

Jasper says: 'I saw a person about ten minutes ago. Near Bryant Park. They had a cone on their head. I thought I was hallucinating.'

Celestine, inside the chapel, is smiling. Celestine reaches out a gloved hand. Jasper takes it. They stand on the corner of 49th and Lexington holding hands for about fifteen seconds, without speaking, the two of them wearing yellow houses, and I tell you: if you had been there, you would have seen the air around them go gold. I am not exaggerating. The light was doing something. The light was being charitable. I am witnessing it. Even I, who have seen four centuries of New York light, am impressed.

Celestine says: 'Shall we walk the rest together?'

Jasper says: 'Yes.'

They walk the last block and a half to the Hotel together. They do not, as they walk, speak. They do not need to. They have already exchanged the information that mattered—which is: you are here, I am here, we are both here. They arrive at the Hotel's Park Avenue entrance at 6:22. The doorman, who has already admitted Inez and Maro, does not react to two more yellow houses. The doorman has, I will say it again because I love him, decided he is going to let every yellow house in, however many arrive, and ask no questions. The doorman is getting a very large tip later from someone whose name he does not yet know, but that is another story. Celestine and Jasper cross the threshold together. The Hotel, feeling them enter, hums so low that only I and a few of the mice in the basement can hear it. I love my Hotel. I love Celestine. I love Jasper. I am going to tell you about Jasper now, properly, from the beginning of their afternoon.

FOUR. Jasper, Who Went as the First House

Friday, April 24, 2026, 2:50 in the afternoon, West 76th Street

Jasper Won-Bauer is, at 2:50 in the afternoon, sitting in their kitchen on West 76th Street eating a banana. Jasper is thirty-one years old. Jasper is the youngest of the nine. Jasper has, in the room behind them, the yellow gabled house that Jasper is about to put on their head. Jasper is eating the banana not because Jasper is hungry but because Jasper has read somewhere that bananas help with nerves, and Jasper is, at this moment, nervous in a particular way that has never happened to them before. The nervousness feels, to Jasper, like a small animal that has climbed up the inside of their ribcage and is sitting on their sternum. The banana is not especially helping. Jasper finishes it anyway. Jasper puts the peel in the compost bin, because Jasper is a careful composter, and because Jasper's downstairs neighbor Mrs. Halabi, who is the compost superintendent of the building, would know somehow if the peel went in the wrong bin. Mrs. Halabi always knows.

Jasper's apartment is a one-bedroom on the fourth floor of a prewar building on West 76th between Columbus and Amsterdam. Jasper has lived in it for six years. The living room is also Jasper's office, and contains a drafting table that used to belong to Jasper's grandfather, who was a cartographer in Seoul, and who sent the drafting table to Jasper in 2015 as a graduation present, along with a note that said, in careful English: 'For the drawing of places that do not yet exist.' Jasper has been drawing places that do not yet exist on this drafting table for eleven years. The drafting table is, Jasper has decided, the best thing Jasper owns. The drafting table is going to outlive Jasper. Jasper has written this into their will. Jasper's will specifies that when Jasper dies the drafting table goes to Jasper's niece Yuna, who is, as of this afternoon, four years old, and who has already—Jasper has noticed—a good eye.

Jasper is, I should mention before going further, the only one of the nine architects who does not yet have their own firm. Jasper works at a mid-size firm in the wedge-shaped building District, four days a week. On the fifth day—on Fridays—Jasper works from home on their own projects. The house for M. Island is one such project. Jasper has been, for nine months, carrying a secret. Jasper has not told anyone at the wedge-shaped building firm about the commission. Jasper's partner, a veterinarian named Annika who lives in Jasper's apartment half the week and in

her own apartment on East 91st the other half, knows. Annika has been, for nine months, the only other person who knows. Annika is, at this moment, at her clinic on East 86th. Annika is going to finish her last appointment at six, go home to change, and meet Jasper at the Hotel at seven-thirty. Annika is going to wear a silver suit. Annika is going to be radiant. Annika is going to photograph Jasper in the yellow house about sixty times over the course of the evening. I know this in advance. I am looking forward to it.

Jasper is the youngest, and also the most anxious, and I am going to be gentle with them. I am always gentle with them. I have been gentle with Jasper since the day Jasper moved to this island, which was in 2013, when Jasper was nineteen and arrived from Philadelphia with two duffel bags and a portfolio for the admissions committee at an art and architecture school downtown, which accepted them. I watched Jasper get off the bus at Port Authority. I watched Jasper stand on Eighth Avenue trying to figure out how the avenues worked. I watched Jasper ask a woman for directions to the Bowery, and the woman say, 'Honey, you are going the wrong way.' I watched Jasper get the right direction. I watched Jasper find a sublet on Clinton Street. I watched Jasper build a life. Jasper has not noticed me watching. Most people do not. Jasper is going to notice tonight. Tonight Jasper is going to realize that I have been with them the whole time. I cannot wait.

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The yellow house that Jasper is about to put on their head is the gabled archetype. It is the house a child draws. Jasper has, for their whole life, been obsessed with the house a child draws. Jasper drew their first one at the age of four, in a coloring book, in red crayon, because the red crayon was the sharpest in the box that afternoon. Jasper's mother kept the drawing. Jasper's mother, whose name is Myung-hee, still has it in a box in the basement of the house in Philadelphia. Jasper has asked to see the drawing many times. Jasper has looked at it carefully. The drawing has, Jasper has concluded, all the features of a house: four walls, a triangle roof, a door, two windows, a chimney with a curl of smoke. The drawing has exactly the features that, in the thousands of years of children drawing houses, children have always drawn. Jasper has wondered: why do we all draw the same house? Why this house? Why not a yurt, a longhouse, a tent, a cave? Why not the kinds of houses most people have actually lived in for most of human history? Why the gabled, pitched-roof, two-window, one-door, chimney'd house, which is, to be honest, a very

Northern European house, and which has nothing to do with Jasper's actual ancestry, which is Korean and Bavarian, neither of which produces, as its native architecture, the house a child draws?

Jasper has been working on this question since they were four. Jasper is not working on it from a political angle. Jasper is not trying to decolonize the gabled house, or expose the gabled house as a product of cultural imperialism, or argue that the gabled house has been imposed by children's books. Jasper is curious. Jasper thinks the gabled house is, for reasons Jasper does not yet understand, something children actually want to draw, even in places where children have never seen one. Jasper thinks the gabled house might be, in some sense, inside us. Jasper has spent the last nine months making a gabled house for M. Island, and the house is tiny, and the house is yellow, and the house is the exact house Jasper drew when Jasper was four, and Jasper is going to tell everyone at the Ball tonight that Jasper has given up trying to design anything else. Jasper is going to say: I have decided to draw the first house again. I have decided to spend my career drawing the first house as many times as I can, in as many places, for as many people. I have decided that the first house is what I have to offer.

This is a very young position. I love Jasper for it. I love Jasper for not being embarrassed to love what Jasper has loved since Jasper was four. Most people, by the time they are thirty-one, have become ashamed of their four-year-old self, and have taught themselves to want more complicated things. Jasper has not. Jasper has, in fact, gone in the other direction. The older Jasper gets, the more Jasper wants exactly what Jasper wanted at four. Jasper is going to be, if Jasper lives to eighty, the most radical uncomplicated architect anyone has met in decades. I am banking on Jasper. I have a lot of Jasper projects in mind for the next forty years. We are going to build many first houses together.

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At 3:02 Jasper puts the house on. Jasper does it alone. Jasper stands in front of the bathroom mirror. Jasper lifts the house with both hands, over their head, and lowers it onto the wire armature that Desmond delivered two days ago. The armature sits on Jasper's shoulders. Jasper tightens the chin-strap, which is concealed inside the collar of the gray-green shirt. The house settles. Jasper turns to the mirror. The two lit golden windows glow from under the roof. The door—a small yellow door, painted on, not cut out—sits just above Jasper's eyebrows. Jasper's

own eyes are hidden by a small mesh opening in the house's façade, which Jasper can see through but which is invisible to the observer. From outside, the house looks complete, with no person in it. From inside, Jasper can see everything.

Jasper whispers, to the mirror: 'I am going to the Ball.'

The mirror does not answer. The mirror never does. But I do. I always do. I say, back, in the voice that Jasper will not hear today but will hear tomorrow, and the next day, and for the rest of Jasper's life, in small variations: I am going with you.

Jasper leaves the apartment at 3:09. Jasper takes the elevator to the lobby. Jasper's doorman, whose name is Rodrigo, and who has worked in this building since 2004, says: 'Jasper, what is this.'

Jasper says: 'It's for the Beaux-Arts Ball.'

Rodrigo says: 'You made this?'

Jasper says: 'I designed it. A fabricator made it.'

Rodrigo says: 'Jasper.' Rodrigo puts his hands on his hips. Rodrigo looks at the yellow house for a long moment. Rodrigo says: 'My daughter is going to want to see this. Is it okay if I take a picture? Elena would not forgive me if I saw you in this and did not take a picture.'

Jasper, who loves Elena, who is seven, and who has been given by Elena, over the years, three drawings—all of houses, all gabled—says: 'Please.'

Rodrigo takes out his phone. Rodrigo takes three pictures, from different angles. Rodrigo sends them to Elena immediately. Rodrigo says: 'Jasper, Elena is going to lose her mind.'

Jasper says: 'Tell her I am going to design a real one for her.'

Rodrigo says: 'You are?'

Jasper, who had not said this before saying it, considers it, and realizes Jasper means it. Jasper says: 'Yes. Someday. When I have my own firm. Elena is going to get the first real one I build. Tell her.'

Rodrigo, who is sixty, whose hair is mostly gray, who has been a New York doorman for twenty-two years and has heard a great many things, looks at Jasper in a way I will have to

describe at some length. Rodrigo looks at Jasper the way a person looks at another person when the second person has just made the first person's day, week, month, and year. Rodrigo has been worried, for about four years, that his daughter Elena will grow up in a building where no one ever notices her. Rodrigo has been especially worried because Elena is seven and already has the kind of wide-open face that, Rodrigo suspects, the world will punish her for. Rodrigo has been trying to teach Elena, for years, to close her face a little. Elena has refused. Elena has continued to be wide open. Elena has, now, been noticed by Jasper, and promised a real house, and Rodrigo is experiencing, in the lobby, a complete overhaul of his parenting philosophy. Rodrigo is going to let Elena be wide open. Rodrigo is going to protect her openness instead of trying to narrow it. Rodrigo is going to spend the rest of his life thinking about this moment. I am going to spend the rest of my life remembering that I got to watch it. I love Rodrigo.

Rodrigo says: 'I'll tell her. Jasper. I'll tell her.'

Jasper walks out of the building. The lobby door swings shut behind them. Rodrigo puts his phone back in his pocket. Rodrigo goes to the front window. Rodrigo watches Jasper walk down West 76th. Rodrigo does not go back to the desk for another four minutes. Rodrigo is, during those four minutes, quiet. Rodrigo is, I will tell you, praying. Rodrigo is not a religious man. Rodrigo is praying anyway. Rodrigo is praying for Jasper. Rodrigo is praying, also, for Elena. Rodrigo is praying for himself. I receive all three prayers. I hold them.

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Jasper walks east on West 76th. Jasper is going to take the subway to the Ball—not because Jasper is embarrassed to walk, but because Jasper is small and has not done much weightlifting and is not sure the house will stay balanced for forty-one blocks. Jasper is going to take the B train from 72nd Street to 57th, and then walk east on 57th to the Hotel. Jasper has planned this route carefully. Jasper has, in the back pocket of the cream trousers, a subway pass. The subway pass has been in the back pocket since 2018, because New York replaced the subway pass with the new tap-system four years ago, and Jasper has been meaning to throw the subway pass away but cannot bring themselves to, because the subway pass has sentimental value, and because Jasper is the kind of person who keeps things. Jasper has the tap-capable phone in the other pocket. Jasper will not, in fact, use the subway pass. The subway pass is for company.

Between Jasper's building and the subway, something happens. I want to describe it carefully. At the corner of 76th and Amsterdam, Jasper stops for a red light. A woman is standing next to Jasper at the corner, waiting for the same light. The woman is about forty, is carrying two bags of groceries, has a small child of maybe five in her other hand. The child looks up. The child sees the yellow house. The child stops breathing. The child's eyes go enormous. The child tugs on the woman's hand, hard, and says, in the emphatic voice of a five-year-old who has just seen something they are going to want to describe later: 'Mama. Mama. Mama. MAMA.'

The woman, who has been looking at her phone, looks up. The woman sees Jasper. The woman looks down at the child. The woman says: 'I see. I see. Oh. Oh wow.'

The child, still staring: 'Mama. It's a house.'

The woman: 'Yes.'

The child: 'There's a person in it.'

The woman: 'Yes.'

The child: 'Mama. Can I have one.'

The woman laughs. The woman says: 'Ask them.'

The child, looking up at Jasper with total seriousness: 'Can I have one?'

Jasper crouches. Jasper gets onto one knee so the house can be at the child's height. This is not easy. The house is not meant to be tilted to that angle. The armature creaks. Jasper steadies it with one hand. The child looks into the small mesh opening. The child cannot see Jasper's face, but the child knows Jasper is in there. Jasper says, through the opening: 'What's your name?'

The child: 'Maisie.'

Jasper: 'Maisie, if you draw a picture of the house you want, and your mom sends it to me, I will try to design it for you. Not right now. When you are older. When I have a firm.'

Maisie: 'Okay.'

Maisie is unfazed. Maisie is, in fact, so unfazed that the mother is alarmed. The mother has been trying for three years to get Maisie to not speak to strangers, and here is Maisie, commissioning an architect. The mother is not angry, however, because the mother has also, at

this moment, recognized Jasper—not personally, but in a larger sense; the mother has recognized that Jasper is the kind of stranger you let your child talk to. The mother has the New York instinct, honed over fifteen years of living here, for telling which strangers are safe. Jasper is safe. The mother knows. The mother holds out her phone to the stranger in the yellow house and says: 'How do I send the drawing?'

Jasper gives the woman an email address. The woman types it into her phone. The woman says: 'I'm Kavya. This is Maisie. Thank you for stopping.'

Jasper: 'Thank you, Maisie. I will wait for the drawing.'

Maisie, with the conviction of a five-year-old who has just been entrusted with a commission: 'I will draw it tonight.'

The light changes. The three of them cross together. On the other side of the avenue, Kavya and Maisie turn south; Jasper continues east. Maisie, looking back over her shoulder, waves with her free hand. Jasper tilts the yellow house forward in acknowledgement. Kavya, who has been walking New York with small children for five years, has never seen her daughter do the look-back-and-wave before. Kavya makes a note in the part of herself where she keeps the things she will remember about raising Maisie. Kavya is going to remember, when Maisie is grown: once, when Maisie was five, Maisie met an architect wearing a yellow house, and Maisie commissioned them to design a real one when Maisie was older, and the architect said yes, and Maisie drew the house that night, and we sent it. I know they will send it. I know Jasper will keep the drawing. I know that, twenty years from now, Jasper will actually design a house for Maisie, when Maisie is twenty-five, and by then Jasper's firm will exist, and the house will be built, in a place that is not yet a place, and Maisie will move in, and Kavya will be there, and we will have another completion, and I will watch.

I am, as I have said, playing the long game. I have a lot of long games going at once.

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Jasper takes the B train from 72nd. The subway is, on a Friday afternoon at 3:25, moderately crowded. A seat is available. Jasper sits. The yellow house fits in the seat just barely; the roof of the house grazes the map frame above Jasper's head. No one on the train is surprised. New Yorkers on the subway have seen, collectively, every possible form of costume, apparel, outburst,

musical instrument, religious procession, and emotional meltdown. A person sitting in a subway seat with a small yellow house on their head is not, to a New Yorker, sufficient cause for surprise. Two people glance. Three people smile. One woman, leaning against the opposite pole, takes a picture without comment. The rest of the car continues whatever they were doing—scrolling, sleeping, reading, softly muttering, trying to get home.

Across the aisle from Jasper, a man is reading a book. The man is older, maybe seventy-five, and is reading a hardcover whose dust jacket has been removed, so Jasper cannot see the title. The man is turning pages slowly. The man is, I can see, reading poems. Specifically, the man is reading a slim book of poems. Specifically, the man is about to finish the poem. The man finishes the poem. The man closes the book. The man looks up. The man sees Jasper in the yellow house.

The man begins to laugh. The man laughs quietly, to himself, the way people do on subways. The man laughs for about eight seconds. The man looks at Jasper. The man does not explain the laugh. The man opens the book again. The man turns back to the same page. The man does not say anything. The man is delighted. The man is a retired English professor from a city college, whose name is Howard, who is on his way home to Chelsea, who is going to tell his husband Stefan about this tonight, and Stefan is going to laugh too, and the two of them are going to have, for the fifteenth time in their long marriage, the conversation about which of the city poets they love best, and they are going to go to bed happy. I am keeping Howard. I am keeping Stefan. I am keeping the laugh. I am keeping the book. I am keeping everything.

The B train pulls into 57th Street/Seventh Avenue at 3:38. Jasper stands. Jasper is very careful about standing, because of the house. The train doors open. Jasper steps out. Jasper climbs the stairs to the street. Jasper is on Seventh Avenue.

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Seventh Avenue at 57th is its own particular chaos. Carnegie Hall is on the southeast corner. Central Park is three blocks away. The Russian Tea Room is twelve feet behind Jasper. Jasper turns east on 57th. Jasper walks past the Russian Tea Room, past the lobby of a building where, in 2019, Jasper met Annika for the first time on a blind date set up by a mutual friend named Clem, who is a lighting designer, and who is going to be at the Ball tonight also, and who has promised to cry visibly when Jasper arrives, because that is the kind of friend Clem is. Jasper walks past

Carnegie Hall. Jasper walks past the Parker Meridien. Jasper walks past the building that used to be the Parker Meridien and is now something else; I forget. Jasper crosses Sixth. Jasper crosses Fifth. Jasper is on the block of 57th between Fifth and Madison, which is one of the richest blocks on me, which contains, side by side, four different designer boutiques and a gallery selling Picassos, and none of this matters to Jasper, because Jasper is watching the sidewalk for oncoming yellow.

Jasper has, somewhere in the back of Jasper's mind, been expecting to see another yellow house. Jasper does not know why. Jasper has not spoken to any of the other architects, and has no reason to think any of them is coming as their building, and has definitely no reason to think any of them is coming as a yellow building. But Jasper has a feeling. Jasper has had the feeling since the walk to 72nd Street. The feeling is: I am not the only one.

At the corner of 57th and Madison, the feeling is confirmed. Jasper sees, half a block ahead, a cone. A person walking. A yellow cone on the person's head. Jasper cannot see the person's face because the cone has a single small window on the side facing Jasper, and the window is at the wrong angle. Jasper stops in the middle of the sidewalk. Jasper cannot run, because the house will tilt. Jasper walks very quickly instead. Jasper catches up to the cone.

The cone is Oriel. Oriel does not see Jasper at first, because Oriel's cone has limited sightlines—only the single window—and because Oriel is not looking around. Oriel is looking at the sidewalk in front of Oriel's feet, because Oriel is a careful walker, and because Oriel has learned that the best way to walk while wearing a cone is to watch your feet and trust the rest. Oriel feels a presence beside them. Oriel turns, slowly. Oriel turns so that the window of Oriel's cone faces Jasper. Through the window of Oriel's cone, Oriel sees, about four feet away, another yellow house. Oriel stops.

Oriel says, through the window, in a voice muffled by the cone: 'I'm sorry. I have to sit down.'

They are on 57th Street between Madison and Fifth. There is a bench in front of a building. The bench is one of those public-private benches that real estate developers install to meet zoning requirements. The bench is made of stone. Oriel walks over to the bench. Oriel sits. Oriel puts both hands on their knees. Oriel is not crying. Oriel is having what a person might call a small nervous breakdown, except that it is not nervous and not a breakdown; it is more like a sudden settling, like a pile of papers that has been in motion for nine months and has just, all at

once, come to rest. Jasper sits next to Oriel. Jasper does not say anything for a moment. Jasper understands.

Oriel says, after a minute: 'Have you been walking all day?'

Jasper: 'I just got on the B train at 72nd. You?'

Oriel: 'I walked from 22nd. I am tired. The cone is heavier than I thought.'

Jasper: 'Have you seen anyone else?'

Oriel, after a long pause: 'I saw someone else about ten minutes ago, near Bryant Park. A wedge. I didn't stop. I thought—I thought I was going crazy. I thought the sun was making me hallucinate.'

Jasper: 'You weren't hallucinating.'

Oriel: 'I know that now.'

They sit on the bench. A pigeon walks in front of them, pecks at something, and walks on. The pigeon does not seem to notice the two yellow houses on the bench. The pigeon is a New York pigeon. The pigeon has seen worse.

Jasper: 'How many do you think there are?'

Oriel: 'I don't know. At least three, counting us and the wedge. Maybe more.'

Jasper: 'Did you know?'

Oriel: 'No. Did you?'

Jasper: 'No. I thought my client was unique. I thought—I thought it was a weird commission. I thought I had gotten lucky.'

Oriel: 'Me too.'

Jasper: 'Who is your client?'

Oriel: 'Someone called M. Island.'

Jasper: 'M. Island.'

Oriel: 'M. Island.'

They sit in silence for about thirty seconds. Both of them are running through the same calculation in their heads, with slight variations. Jasper is thinking: M. Island is not one person. M. Island is an institution. M. Island is a real estate investment trust. M. Island is a firm that commissions multiple architects on the same parcel, the way the Serpentine Pavilion does, for comparative purposes, and we have all been making competing designs without knowing. Oriel is thinking: M. Island is a person, but an eccentric person, a collector, someone who wants nine different yellow houses for nine different parts of the city. Both of them are wrong. They are not wrong about everything—M. Island did commission all nine of them—but they are wrong about what M. Island is. M. Island is me. I am both an institution and a person, and also neither. I am their island. I am about to be revealed. I cannot wait.

Oriel stands. Jasper stands. They continue east on 57th. They walk together. They do not hold hands—Oriel is not a hand-holding kind of person, not today, not with a cone—but they walk at the same pace, and they do not speak, and they are walking together. They turn south on Park at 57th. They walk the six blocks to the Hotel. They arrive at 4:11. The doorman, on seeing two more yellow houses, says, for the first time that afternoon, 'Huh.' It is the only thing the doorman is going to say about any of the houses for the next four hours. Huh. Then the doorman opens the door. Jasper and Oriel enter the Hotel together. The Hotel, for the fourth time today, hums.

I will tell you about Tamsin now. Tamsin has been walking for a while.

FIVE. Tamsin, Who Went as a Letter

Friday, April 24, 2026, 3:20 in the afternoon, Hudson Street

Tamsin Bellweather-Ríos is, at 3:20 in the afternoon, writing a letter. This is not unusual. Tamsin writes, by hand, at least one letter a day, and has been doing so since 2007, when Tamsin was twenty-three and decided, in the middle of a thunderstorm in Austin, Texas, that what Tamsin wanted to do with their life was write letters. Tamsin was in architecture school at the time. Tamsin did not quit architecture school. Tamsin has simply, ever since, practiced both—architecture in the morning, letters in the afternoon—and Tamsin has come to think of them as the same practice, because a building is a letter to a street, and a letter is a small building for a particular person to stop in and read, and the two crafts, in Tamsin's experience, have never seriously contradicted one another.

The letter Tamsin is writing at 3:20 is to Tamsin's grandmother, Esperanza Ríos, who lives in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, who is eighty-four, who has received a letter from Tamsin every Friday since 2007, which is nineteen years of Fridays, which is 988 letters, all of which Esperanza has kept in three wooden boxes in her closet. Esperanza reads each letter twice: once on Friday morning (by the time it arrives it is usually Friday morning; Tamsin sends on Thursdays), and once on Sunday afternoon, after Mass. Esperanza has forgotten almost nothing about the last nineteen years of Tamsin's life because of this practice. Esperanza has not forgotten, for example, that Tamsin came out as non-binary in a letter dated August 14, 2011. Esperanza has not forgotten that Tamsin bought a drafting compass at an estate sale in 2014 and was, for three months, obsessed with the particular shade of blue of the compass's case. Esperanza has not forgotten the name of Tamsin's first boyfriend (Dante), or first girlfriend (Rosa), or current partner (Clive, a carpenter, forty-one, Welsh), or current cat (Merengue). Esperanza keeps all of it. Esperanza is one of the few people on earth, Tamsin has decided, who is actually listening.

Today's letter, which Tamsin is writing on cream paper with a fountain pen at Tamsin's desk in the Hudson Street office, will not be mailed until Thursday. Tamsin has not abandoned the Thursday schedule. Tamsin is writing it today because Tamsin always writes it on the afternoon of something significant, so that Tamsin can describe the something-significant while the something-significant is still happening. Tamsin's grandmother, on reading the letter on Friday

morning, will have the eerie experience of learning about Tamsin's yellow house on the day before the Ball, which Tamsin will describe in next week's letter. Esperanza enjoys this. Esperanza has come to rely on Tamsin's letters for their slightly-out-of-order quality, the way a life story is slightly out of order when you remember it.

The letter begins, as all of Tamsin's letters to Esperanza begin: 'Abuelita, mi abuelita, mi vieja querida.' Then, in English, because Tamsin and Esperanza write to each other bilingually—Spanish for the openings and closings, English for the middles, by long tradition—the letter says: 'I am about to walk across the island dressed as a shed.'

The letter continues: 'The shed is yellow. The shed is my building for the Ball. I will tell you about the Ball properly next week. Today I will tell you only this. I did not expect to like the shed as much as I do. I did not know, when I put it on this morning, that putting on a shed would feel like being held. Maybe I have been trying, all along, to live inside a shed. Maybe my real home is a shed in Vermont that I have not yet gone to live in. Maybe I am secretly a rural person. Do not tell Clive. Clive thinks I am a city person forever.'

Tamsin finishes the paragraph. Tamsin puts the pen down. Tamsin stands up. Tamsin walks over to the shed, which is sitting on the floor in the corner of the office, next to a small bronze sculpture of a crane that Clive made for Tamsin in 2023 and that Tamsin likes to position near anything important. Tamsin picks up the shed. The shed is, as I mentioned earlier, a wedge: a leaning gable, yellow, with a single slit-window that looks like a mail slot. Tamsin built a mail slot into the shed deliberately. Tamsin wanted the shed to be receptive. A building, Tamsin believes, should be able to receive mail. Even if the mail is symbolic. Even if the mail is only the regard of strangers. The mail slot on Tamsin's shed is going to receive, over the course of this afternoon, approximately forty looks from strangers, each of which is, Tamsin is convinced, a kind of letter. Tamsin will feel the letters arriving through the slot. Tamsin has a theory about this. The theory is not quite scientific. The theory is, Tamsin believes, true.

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I should tell you about Tamsin. Tamsin is forty-two. Tamsin was born in Honduras, as I said, where their mother's family is from. Tamsin's father, Rhys Bellweather, was a British agricultural researcher stationed in Tegucigalpa in 1983, when he met Tamsin's mother, Yolanda Ríos, at a

dance. The two of them married in 1984. Tamsin was born in 1984. The family moved to the United States in 1989, when Tamsin was five, first to Ann Arbor, then to Austin, where Tamsin's father got a job at the University of Texas. Tamsin grew up, accordingly, as a half-Honduran, half-Welsh, Texas kid who moved to New York in 2011 to go to graduate school at the university and has remained. Tamsin's parents are both still alive and still in Austin. Tamsin's parents will not be at the Ball tonight. Tamsin's grandmother Esperanza has never been to New York, and will not come—she is eighty-four, and travel is no longer in the cards—and has never met any of Tamsin's New York people except through photographs and letters. Esperanza is, nevertheless, the single most important presence in Tamsin's professional life. Tamsin designs, in a real sense, for Esperanza. Tamsin designs buildings Esperanza could read, if a building were a letter. Tamsin has said this. Tamsin has said: my abuelita is my client. Every building I make is to her.

When M. Island's commission came in, nine months ago, Tamsin suspected that M. Island was someone who had read one of Tamsin's letters. The brief—a single page, handwritten, on cream paper similar to the paper Tamsin uses to write to Esperanza—requested 'a small yellow building with a slot in it, addressed to the street.' Tamsin, reading the brief, had the strong sensation that the brief was from someone who had been corresponding with Tamsin for years. Tamsin wrote back, asking M. Island to describe, in any level of detail, the slot. M. Island wrote back: 'A mail slot. A small one. A slit. Enough that the building could feel itself being looked at.'

Tamsin wept, briefly, on reading that reply. Tamsin had never told anyone, outside of letters to Esperanza, that Tamsin believed a building could feel itself being looked at. Tamsin had been carrying this belief privately for twenty years. Here, suddenly, was someone—M. Island—who believed it too, and had put it into a brief. Tamsin has been wondering, ever since, whether M. Island is someone Tamsin knows. Tamsin has considered, in turn: Clive. (No, Clive would not bother with the fiction of M. Island; Clive would have commissioned Tamsin directly.) Esperanza. (No, Esperanza does not have that kind of money, and also Esperanza would not commission a building without telling Tamsin; Esperanza is incapable of keeping secrets from Tamsin, it is one of Esperanza's great weaknesses.) A friend. (Which one?) A former professor. (Tamsin has considered each of them; none fits.) Tamsin has, in the last two weeks, begun to consider that M. Island might not be a person Tamsin knows. Tamsin has, in the last two days, begun to consider that M. Island might be—but no. It was too large a thought. Tamsin is going to finish the thought tonight. Tamsin is going to finish many thoughts tonight.

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At 3:47, Tamsin puts on the shed.

The shed is, structurally, the most asymmetrical of the nine houses, because the shed leans. The shed's roof slants steeply down on one side. The shed therefore requires, on its head-side, a slightly unusual adjustment—Tamsin wears the shed with the steep side pitched forward, so that the roof comes down over Tamsin's forehead at an angle. This means Tamsin has to hold their head very slightly back while walking, which means Tamsin walks, for the first time in their life, with their chin up. Tamsin has, usually, walked with their chin slightly down. The shed is going to correct Tamsin's posture for one afternoon. I enjoy this enormously. Tamsin is going to notice, at some point tonight, that Tamsin can see the sky. Tamsin has not looked at the sky this much since Tamsin was a child in Honduras. The sky tonight is going to be pink at 7:42, and orange at 7:54, and lavender-pink at 8:11, and Tamsin is going to see all of it. I have arranged the sky. I am very proud of the sky this evening.

Tamsin leaves the Hudson Street office at 3:52. Tamsin locks the door. Tamsin descends the four flights of stairs. Tamsin's office is on the top floor of a small office building that contains, below Tamsin, a graphic design studio, a therapist, a literary agency, and a tailor (not Yusuf; a different tailor, a woman named Constance who specializes in theater costumes). Each door Tamsin passes in the stairwell is a door Tamsin has stood in front of, at various times, for various reasons. Tamsin has commissioned a logo from the graphic design studio. Tamsin has wept to the therapist. Tamsin has submitted a book proposal to the literary agency, which is in consideration. Tamsin has had three sets of trousers hemmed by Constance. The building is, in this way, a vertical village. Tamsin has, over four years in this office, built a small life inside the four floors of the building. Tamsin loves the building. Tamsin has, in letters to Esperanza, described the building as 'a building I am having a successful marriage with.'

Tamsin emerges onto Hudson Street at 3:55. Hudson Street in Tribeca at 3:55 on a Friday afternoon is the beginning of the rush, but not the rush itself. The people on Hudson at this hour are people who left work early, people who work freelance and have finished their day, people who are taking their dogs out, people who are picking up their kids from the nearby school, people who work at the restaurants and bars that are about to open. Tamsin recognizes many of them. Tamsin has, in four years of having an office on Hudson, become a minor fixture

on the block. Tamsin is the one who wears interesting coats. Tamsin is the one who buys coffee at the place across the street. Tamsin is the one you see buying flowers at the Korean deli on Fridays, because Tamsin always buys flowers for the weekend, and Clive comes over on Friday evenings.

Clive is in upstate New York this afternoon, delivering a table. Clive will not be at the Ball. Clive has been invited, and Tamsin has wanted Clive to come, but Clive has said: 'Love, the table is due tomorrow, and I have to deliver it tonight, and I want you to be fully present at your own Ball without managing me.' Tamsin has reluctantly agreed. Tamsin loves Clive. Tamsin has been dating Clive for five years. Tamsin is, despite the ball, slightly sad that Clive is not here. The sadness is not overwhelming. The sadness is more like a low note in a chord. Clive will be here on Monday. Clive has promised to come to the Hotel at 8 p.m. on Monday and have dinner with Tamsin in the restaurant, wearing a suit, and they will toast together. That will be their Ball. Tamsin has this to look forward to.

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Tamsin walks north on Hudson. The first person who notices the shed is a dog. The dog is a small white terrier named Oatmeal, who belongs to a woman named Sylvia who lives on North Moore Street, and who is walking Oatmeal past Tamsin's building as Tamsin emerges. Oatmeal stops. Oatmeal sits down on the sidewalk. Oatmeal stares at the shed. Sylvia, who does not immediately understand what Oatmeal is staring at, follows Oatmeal's gaze, sees the yellow shed, and says: 'Oh, Tamsin.'

Tamsin and Sylvia are friends. Sylvia has known Tamsin for three years. Sylvia is a podcast producer. Sylvia has interviewed Tamsin twice for a podcast Sylvia makes about design. Sylvia has been in Tamsin's office. Sylvia has met Clive. Sylvia has a standing invitation to Tamsin's apartment for tea on Tuesdays, which Sylvia and Tamsin have not yet managed to actually observe, because both of them are busy, but the invitation is standing.

Sylvia says: 'Is this for the Ball?'

Tamsin, muffled through the shed: 'It is.'

Sylvia says: 'Tamsin. You are wearing a shed.'

Tamsin: 'I am.'

Sylvia: 'You are wearing a shed and walking uptown.'

Tamsin: 'I am.'

Sylvia, to Oatmeal: 'Oatmeal. Oatmeal. This is Tamsin. Tamsin is wearing a shed. It is okay. This is happening.'

Oatmeal, who has decided that the shed is not a threat, stands up. Oatmeal walks over to Tamsin and sniffs Tamsin's shoes. Oatmeal wags their tail once. Oatmeal has approved. Sylvia says: 'I am so glad we ran into you. You look magnificent. Do you want me to walk with you for a few blocks?'

Tamsin: 'Please.'

So Sylvia and Oatmeal walk Tamsin north on Hudson. They get as far as Canal, at which point Sylvia has to turn east for an appointment. Sylvia takes three pictures of Tamsin on the way. Sylvia sends one of them to Tamsin. Sylvia sends one of them to a group text of their mutual friends. Sylvia keeps one for herself. At Canal, Sylvia kisses Tamsin on the cheek of the shed—it is awkward; the shed's cheek is plastic; Sylvia does it anyway—and says: 'Tell me everything on Tuesday.' Tamsin promises to. Sylvia heads east. Oatmeal, looking over their shoulder, barks once at the shed in farewell. I love Oatmeal. Oatmeal is one of the most serious dogs on me. Oatmeal understands.

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Tamsin continues north. I want to tell you what is happening inside the shed. Tamsin is composing, in their head, the next paragraph of the letter to Esperanza. The paragraph goes like this—Tamsin is going to write it down at the Ball, during a lull, on a cocktail napkin, and slip the cocktail napkin into the envelope on Thursday morning—the paragraph goes like this:

'Abuelita. I am walking up Hudson Street wearing the shed. The shed is a building. The shed is also a letter. I am, right now, a letter walking up the island. I am being read. The people who pass me are reading me. The dog who stopped was reading me. The bird on the sign above the deli was reading me. Even the air is reading me. I did not know, until today, that a person could be a letter. I always thought a letter was a thing you sent. I did not know you could also be one.

Abuelita, I think I have been a letter my whole life. I think you have been reading me my whole life. I think every letter I have sent you has been, in some way, the same letter: I am here, I am here, I am here. I think the shed is that letter in architecture. I think the house I made for the client is that letter in architecture also. I think everything I make is the same letter. Forgive me. I know this is a long letter.'

Tamsin, walking, composes this in their head at about the speed of walking. Tamsin is used to composing letters while walking. Tamsin has been doing it for nineteen years. Tamsin writes, in a moleskine at night, the things Tamsin composed on the sidewalk during the day. The moleskine goes back to the drafting table. The drafting table yields, the next morning, buildings. The buildings are, Tamsin believes, the letters rendered into three dimensions. I have watched Tamsin do this for eleven years. I have been, in many of the letters, the addressee. Tamsin does not know this, yet, either. Tamsin is going to discover it tonight. Tamsin's discovery is going to involve crying. I will be gentle.

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At Canal Street Tamsin turns east. Tamsin is taking the Spring Street 6 to the great train station, and then walking to the Hotel. Tamsin has chosen the 6 for reasons of line aesthetics: the 6 is the most evenly-spaced of the downtown lines, the 6 is green, the 6 has always felt to Tamsin like the most readable of the subways. The 6 is also busier. Tamsin does not mind. Tamsin enjoys the 6. Tamsin is looking forward to the ride.

Tamsin walks to Lafayette and descends into the Spring Street station. The stairs are narrow. The shed grazes the walls a little. Tamsin apologizes to the walls. Tamsin has always apologized to walls. Tamsin's mother used to make fun of Tamsin for this; Tamsin's mother has, over the last twenty years, stopped making fun of it, because Tamsin's mother has come to understand that Tamsin actually means the apology. The wall, in Tamsin's moral universe, is a thing that deserves to be spoken to. The wall does not mind the scrape. The wall, if anything, is delighted to have been scraped by a yellow shed; it is the most interesting thing that has happened to this wall since 1997, when a Keith Haring-inspired mural briefly existed here and was, almost immediately, removed by the MTA.

Tamsin swipes through. Tamsin goes down to the platform. A train arrives within two minutes, which is unusual for the 6 at 4:15 on a Friday; I have arranged it; I have been arranging the transit schedules all afternoon. Tamsin steps onto the train. The train is moderately full. Tamsin stands near the door. The yellow shed, inside the subway car, is now part of a moving tableau: the shed, a man with a violin case, a woman reading a book in Cyrillic, two teenagers sharing earbuds, an older gentleman in a three-piece suit, a teenager with a skateboard, a woman in scrubs with her eyes closed. The car is one of the small, finite, perfect compositions I make every minute of every day. Tamsin, who is composing a letter in their head, notices the composition and adds it to the letter. Tamsin thinks: I am inside a letter. The subway car is a letter. Everyone in it is a sentence. I am one of the sentences. I love my sentence-mates.

The train moves north. 14th Street. 23rd. 28th. 33rd. At 33rd, a woman boards the train and stands directly in front of Tamsin. The woman is wearing a yellow raincoat, even though it is not raining and has not rained all day and will not rain tonight. The woman's raincoat is the same yellow as Tamsin's shed. The woman does not notice Tamsin. The woman is looking at her phone. The phone illuminates the woman's face in a soft blue light. Tamsin looks at the raincoat. The raincoat is, Tamsin sees with the eye of a practicing designer, from a particular brand Tamsin has been watching for two years, made by a small studio in Brooklyn run by a woman named Ingrid. Tamsin has, in fact, been meaning to buy an Ingrid raincoat. Tamsin has not bought one because Tamsin has been trying to be frugal, because the commission money has not yet fully cleared, and because Tamsin's financial life has always been a careful choreography. Tamsin looks at the raincoat. Tamsin thinks: I am going to buy one. On Monday. I am going to buy an Ingrid raincoat. It will be my gift to myself.

The woman gets off at 42nd. Tamsin also gets off at 42nd. The two of them ride the escalator up to street level together, side by side, and the woman still does not notice Tamsin, which is astonishing, because Tamsin is wearing a yellow shed, but the woman is absorbed in her phone and the woman is the kind of person who lives mostly in her phone, which I do not judge, because phones are also a kind of letter, and the woman is, in her way, reading. At the top of the escalator, the woman turns east. Tamsin turns east. They are going, it turns out, the same direction. They walk half a block apart. The woman turns north on Vanderbilt. Tamsin continues east on 42nd. I watch them separate. The woman, half a block later, finally looks up from her phone, and glances behind her, and sees Tamsin in the yellow shed walking away from her, and

gasps, and puts her phone in her pocket. The woman stands on Vanderbilt for a moment. The woman thinks: I almost missed that. I almost walked past a yellow shed in my yellow raincoat and didn't notice. The woman looks at her phone in her pocket, accusingly, the way a person looks at a bad friend. The woman turns and walks uptown, without the phone, for the first time all day. The woman is going to a therapist's appointment. The woman is going to tell her therapist about the shed. The therapist is going to, finally, say something helpful, because the shed, for reasons the therapist cannot articulate, is going to give the therapist the opening the therapist has been looking for for six months. I am keeping the woman. I am keeping the therapist. I am, I tell you, keeping everyone. I am the island. This is what I do.

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Tamsin walks east on 42nd, then turns north on Park, then walks the seven blocks to the Hotel. The shed, on Park Avenue, is a beautiful yellow shape moving up a corridor of yellow taxicabs and yellow tulips. Tamsin is, by this point, four hours into wearing the shed. Tamsin's neck is a little sore. Tamsin does not mind. Tamsin has made it this far. Tamsin can make it seven more blocks.

On the corner of 44th and Park, Tamsin sees, from half a block away, another yellow house. This one is a silo. A truncated cone with an arched doorway cut into it. The person wearing the silo is walking slowly, carefully, their hands in the pockets of white trousers. The person is Finn Abernathy-Shah. Finn is coming from Hell's Kitchen, via the S shuttle to the great train station, and from there walking east and north. Finn and Tamsin have never met, but have heard of each other. They are both in a loose network of New York architects under fifty who correspond occasionally about projects. Tamsin has read one of Finn's articles in a small journal. Finn has heard Tamsin speak on a panel. Each of them knows, vaguely, who the other is. But the two of them have never been in the same room until this moment, and they have certainly never both been wearing yellow houses at the same time, and the combination is, for Tamsin, the thing that finishes the sentence that has been forming all day.

Tamsin stops in the middle of the sidewalk. The shed tilts forward, slightly, with the momentum. Tamsin steadies it. Tamsin says, aloud, to themselves: 'Oh. Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, oh, oh.'

Each 'oh' is a different emotion. The first oh is recognition. The second oh is denial. The third oh is confusion. The fourth oh is the beginning of laughter. The fifth oh—there is a fifth—is the acceptance. Tamsin begins, inside the shed, to laugh. Tamsin laughs for a good thirty seconds, standing still on the corner of 44th and Park, the shed shaking slightly with each laugh. A woman waiting for the light looks at Tamsin, does not know why Tamsin is laughing, begins to laugh herself, and cannot stop. The two of them laugh together for about fifteen seconds, at the corner, in the late afternoon light. The light changes. The woman walks off, still smiling. Tamsin crosses Park.

Finn has, by now, seen Tamsin. Finn is not as outwardly emotional as Tamsin; Finn does not laugh. Finn simply stops, watches Tamsin cross the avenue, and when Tamsin arrives, Finn says, in a voice that is calm and a little ironic: 'Hi.'

Tamsin: 'Hi.'

Finn: 'You're the wedge.'

Tamsin: 'I'm a shed. Yes.'

Finn: 'You're the shed. I'm the silo. This is absurd.'

Tamsin: 'Absolutely absurd.'

Finn: 'How did this happen?'

Tamsin: 'M. Island?'

Finn: 'M. Island. Of course M. Island.'

They stand on the corner for a few seconds. They look at each other, through the mail slot and the arched doorway respectively. Tamsin says: 'Tell me as we walk.'

They walk the remaining blocks to the Hotel together. They do, in fact, tell each other. Finn tells Tamsin about the brief, and about Hell's Kitchen, and about the former piano factory where Finn's office is. Tamsin tells Finn about the shed, and the letters, and about Esperanza. They discover, in the course of six blocks, that they have each had a version of the same nine-month experience. They are, by the time they reach the Hotel's door at 4:58, friends. Their friendship is, I predict, going to outlast this Ball by forty or fifty years. They are going to collaborate, in 2031,

on a building together—a small project in Queens—and the building is going to be wonderful. I am arranging it. I am always arranging. Tonight I do not have to arrange much, because the Ball itself is going to do all the arranging. The Ball is going to be the biggest arrangement of the year.

Tamsin and Finn enter the Hotel together. The doorman, on his fifth and sixth yellow houses, nods wearily but fondly. The doorman is having the best day of his career. The doorman does not yet realize it; the doorman will, later tonight, when the tips begin to accumulate; for now, the doorman is simply trying to do his job, which is to open doors. The doors open. Tamsin and Finn cross the threshold. The Hotel, humming now at a more sustained pitch, is fully awake. I will tell you now about Oriel, who has already arrived. I meant to tell you about Oriel earlier, but Oriel's chapter is going to be short, because Oriel's walk was the quietest.

SIX. Oriel, Who Went as a Tower

Friday, April 24, 2026, 3:55 in the afternoon, West 22nd Street

Oriel Nakamura-Ferreira lives alone. I want to begin with that, because everything else about Oriel proceeds from it. Oriel has lived alone since 2009. Oriel is forty-four years old. Oriel has been, for fifteen of those forty-four years, by themselves in a one-bedroom apartment on West 22nd Street between Eighth and Ninth, two flights up, windows facing south, rent stabilized. Oriel has a rice cooker, a kettle, a narrow couch upholstered in gray linen, a low wooden table, seven plants, a drafting table, a bed, a small bookshelf, and a great many books arranged on the bookshelf by color rather than subject, because Oriel once read an argument against that method and found the argument unpersuasive. The books are in a gradient, blue to green to yellow to orange to red to pink to white to gray to black. The apartment is, visually, one of the quietest rooms on me. I love it. I have been its third resident, counting the man who lived there from 1961 to 1994 and the woman who lived there from 1994 to 2009, and Oriel is the one I am fondest of, because Oriel talks to the apartment, and the apartment, after sixty-five years of listening, finally has someone who narrates to it.

Oriel narrates, every morning, over the kettle. Oriel narrates, every evening, over the rice cooker. Oriel narrates to the plants, individually, by name—the rubber tree is Ferdinand, the fiddle-leaf is Delia, the fern is Sasha, the four succulents are collectively called the boys—and Oriel narrates, when working at the drafting table, a kind of muttered running commentary to the drawings as they come into being. Someone hearing Oriel through the wall for the first time would assume Oriel had a partner. Oriel's neighbors, after the first month of living next to Oriel, have always figured out that there is no partner, there is just Oriel and the apartment, and Oriel has made the apartment into company. This is not a sad thing. It is one of the least sad things I have ever seen a person do. Oriel's solitude is not lonely. Oriel's solitude is the most populated solitude I can think of.

At 3:55 on the afternoon of April 24, 2026, Oriel is standing in front of the hall mirror with the yellow cone on their head. The cone is, as I have described, a pure conical form, tall, with a single small arched window cut high into its side, lit from within by the same kind of low LED Desmond installed in Celestine's chapel. The cone is the one Oriel designed for M. Island: a

house for one person, intentionally, verticalized, celebrating what Oriel calls, in the brief Oriel submitted, 'the generosity of the tower-dweller.' Oriel has written, in the brief: 'The person at the top of a tower is not hoarding space. The person at the top of a tower is making room, below them, for everyone else. Solitude is how I build the future. My house is a house for one person, on the understanding that beneath their floor, in time, will be another person, and beneath that, another, and beneath that, another, and the city will be a city of single floors stacked by care.'

I have read Oriel's brief ten or eleven times. Each time I read it, I am moved. Each time, I think: I have not commissioned anyone better. Each time, I think: Oriel, you are going to be fine, you are going to more than fine, you are going to be one of the architects I keep. Oriel does not know I have read the brief. Oriel thinks the brief went into M. Island's filing cabinet, wherever that is, and was read once, by a person, and then the contract was signed. Oriel does not know that I have, in fact, been rereading the brief every Sunday evening for nine months. Oriel does not know that I have, in the margins of my own mental copy, written small notes: yes; exactly; this is the future; build this; build this.

Oriel adjusts the cone. The cone sits well on Oriel's head. Desmond made the cone to Oriel's specifications: it is exactly 24 inches tall from brim to tip, because Oriel believes that most towers fail because they are the wrong proportion, and 24 inches is what 24 inches of additional height looks like on Oriel, and Oriel wanted the cone to be a real tower-sized increment and not a hat-sized increment. The cone makes Oriel's total height seven feet two inches. Oriel will not, today, fit through the subway car door if Oriel forgets to duck. Oriel has decided to walk.

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Oriel is, in addition to being the one who lives alone, the one who speaks least. I am going to honor that in this chapter. I am going to give Oriel fewer lines of quoted dialogue. I am going to do more of the describing, and let Oriel walk in relative quiet. Oriel will appreciate this. Oriel does not know this chapter is being written, of course, but when Oriel reads it someday—and Oriel will, because I will make sure this novella reaches Oriel, through Surjan, through channels I am not at liberty to explain here—Oriel will notice that the chapter was paced slowly and given room, and Oriel will know that I understood. This is, in its way, a love letter. Most of this book is.

Oriel was born in 1981 in São Paulo, to a Brazilian mother (Luciana Ferreira, journalist) and a Japanese father (Kaoru Nakamura, translator). Oriel lived in São Paulo until the age of eleven, then moved with the family to Osaka, where Oriel lived until seventeen, then moved to New York for college and has never permanently left. Oriel's parents divorced amicably when Oriel was twenty-two and both remarried, Luciana to a Portuguese archaeologist and Kaoru to an American poet who lives in Kyoto. Oriel is, accordingly, a person with four living parents, all of whom Oriel gets along with, all of whom Oriel calls on different days of the month, all of whom are going to be, in various time zones, awake tonight waiting for a photograph from the Ball. Oriel has an older brother, Noé, who is a pediatric oncologist in Barcelona, and who has been, since they were both children, the louder Nakamura-Ferreira. Oriel has always been the quieter one. Oriel has come to believe, over decades, that quiet is a gift Noé gave them by being loud. Oriel has been protected, by Noé's loudness, from having to talk much. Oriel, in gratitude, has listened all the more carefully. Oriel and Noé talk on the phone every other Sunday. They are very close. Noé will not be at the Ball. Noé has a conference in Madrid. Noé will call at the end of the evening to hear how it went.

Oriel founded their firm in 2015. The firm is called ORIEL, which is the word for a kind of projecting bay window, and which is also Oriel's first name, and Oriel has declined, for ten years, to explain which of these is the primary reference. The firm has two employees: a junior architect named Pilar (a different Pilar from the woman who followed Inez up Park Avenue earlier in this story; this Pilar is Argentinian, twenty-nine, has worked for Oriel since 2022, and will be at the Ball with her partner, a dancer named Sebastien), and a part-time bookkeeper named Renata who has been keeping Oriel's books since 2015 and who refers to Oriel, in emails, as 'my dear singular problem.' Oriel's firm has completed five buildings. All of them are tall and narrow. All of them are, according to Oriel's convictions, tower-dwelling buildings, though none of them is as tall as the cone on Oriel's head right now. Oriel's tallest building is an eight-story tower on a 18-foot-wide lot in Long Island City, completed in 2021, which houses eight apartments, one per floor, and which is Oriel's most beloved project and which I have been, since its topping-out, showing off to the other boroughs in a way that has begun to make Queens feel smug.

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At 4:02, Oriel leaves the apartment. Oriel pauses at the door, looks back at the seven plants, says 'Back soon,' closes the door, double-locks it. Oriel descends the two flights of stairs. The staircase of Oriel's building is carpeted in a worn red runner that was installed in 1978 and that the building's super, a man named Tony, has been promising to replace since 2003. The carpet is not going to be replaced. Everyone knows this. Everyone, including Tony, is fine with it. The carpet has acquired, over four decades, a kind of dignity. The carpet has become part of the building. The carpet is a permanent fixture of the building's interior design, even though no one ever chose it for that role. I love the carpet. I have watched it sink slowly into its place. It is one of the small, permanent, untouched things of my island. Oriel has, every day for fifteen years, walked down this carpet, and will walk back up it tonight after the Ball, and the carpet will welcome them back.

Oriel emerges onto West 22nd Street at 4:04. The cone goes first through the door. The door is tall enough for the cone, barely, which is lucky, because Oriel did not calculate the door's height when specifying the cone, and would have been mortified if the cone had not fit. Oriel stands on the stoop for a moment, adjusting to the outside air. The outside air is soft. It is 62 degrees, the forsythia is finishing, the plane trees are leafing, there is a faint scent of diesel and a faint scent of coffee and a faint scent of the narcissus from the planters in front of the brownstone across the street, and the whole soft weather of the afternoon is wrapping around Oriel like a coat. Oriel stands on the stoop for almost a minute. Oriel is not usually this still outdoors. Indoor stillness, yes; Oriel is indoor-still constantly. Outdoor stillness is rarer. Oriel has been outdoor-still, this past year, maybe five times. Each time counts for Oriel as a small moment of recognition that the outside exists, that it is continuous with the inside, that Oriel's solitude is not the apartment but is something Oriel carries out into the air.

Oriel begins to walk. East on 22nd. Oriel's route is 22nd east to Park, then Park north to 49th. It is about three and a half miles, which means a walk of around eighty-five minutes at Oriel's pace, because Oriel walks slowly, because the cone is heavy, and because Oriel is, as Oriel will confess to Jasper on the bench in forty minutes, already tired.

Tired of what. Let me tell you. Oriel has been, for the last three weeks, sleeping four hours a night. The commission for M. Island has consumed Oriel. Not because the design was hard—Oriel knew, within two weeks of receiving the brief, what the house would be—but because the final permits have been unresolved, and the client has not yet chosen a site, and Oriel

has been, for three weeks, revising the structural package so it could sit on any of twelve possible lots the client might choose, which has required twelve structural variations, which has required twelve rounds of sketches, which has required twelve conversations with Oriel's structural engineer, who is a man named Anwar, who has been patient with Oriel, but who is also tired. Oriel has arrived at this Friday in April depleted. The Ball, for Oriel, is not a triumph. The Ball is, right now, an obligation Oriel would have preferred to postpone. Oriel is walking slowly because Oriel is reserving energy. Oriel has decided to walk anyway because Oriel suspects—correctly—that walking will help more than resting.

Oriel's cone tilts forward, slightly, in the gentle breeze. Oriel steadies it with one hand for a block, then lets go. The cone is balanced. The cone will be fine.

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On Seventh Avenue at 22nd, Oriel stops at a red light. A woman on a bicycle glides past, slows down, circles back, stops her bike in front of Oriel, puts one foot on the ground, and says: 'Cone.'

Oriel says: 'Cone.'

The woman on the bicycle is about sixty. She is wearing a canvas jacket. She has short gray hair. She has the cheerful, direct affect of someone who has spent a long life cycling in New York and has, accordingly, lost most of her ability to be surprised by anything. She looks Oriel up and down. She says: 'This is for something.'

Oriel: 'A ball. The Beaux-Arts Ball.'

The woman: 'My grandfather, in 1931.'

Oriel is, for a moment, astonished. The woman is the first stranger Oriel has encountered on any Ball day, ever, who has known the reference without being prompted. Oriel says: 'You know about it?'

The woman: 'My grandfather was there. He went as another tall building.' The woman pauses. 'He was not very good at it. Apparently he could not see through the costume and walked into a table. But he went.'

Oriel laughs. The cone shakes. Oriel says: 'I am trying very hard not to walk into a table.'

The woman: 'It's the spiritual descendants thing, then. Ninety-five years. Is there a photograph?'

Oriel: 'I think there will be.'

The woman: 'Good. Put me in it.'

Oriel: 'You're not at the Ball.'

The woman: 'I am now.' The woman grins. 'You are going to the Ball, and I am here on my bicycle, and I am one of the people who made sure you got there safely, which I will have by not running you over at this light. I will be in the photograph. In spirit. You will put me there. What's your name?'

Oriel: 'Oriel.'

The woman: 'Oriel. I'm Margaret. My grandfather was Frederick Schneider, Jr. Remember us, when they take the photograph. Put us in.'

The light changes. Margaret pushes off with one foot. Margaret rides east across Seventh. Margaret is gone before Oriel has finished saying, 'I will.' Oriel crosses Seventh in the other direction, and walks east toward Sixth. Oriel is going to remember Margaret. I know Oriel. Oriel will remember Margaret until the photograph is taken, and then Oriel will, in the split second before the flash, think the name Margaret Schneider, granddaughter of Frederick Jr., and the photograph will contain, invisibly, one extra spirit. I love Margaret. Margaret does not know yet that she is ever going to see the photograph, but she will; Surjan will include a print in the envelope that eventually reaches her by a mechanism I have set in motion and will not explain. Margaret is going to pin the photograph to her refrigerator. Margaret is going to die peacefully in 2034 with the photograph still on the refrigerator. I am keeping Margaret. I am keeping Frederick Jr. I am keeping everything.

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Oriel walks east on 22nd, crosses Sixth, crosses Fifth. Oriel pauses at the wedge-shaped building. Oriel has always paused at the wedge-shaped building. The wedge-shaped building has been, for Oriel, a kind of patron saint; Oriel, a tower-builder, has admired the wedge-shaped building's compression of street-meeting into a single sharp corner, the way the wedge-shaped

building is basically a tower that has decided to lean. Oriel, in the cone, stands on the corner of 22nd and Broadway and looks up at the wedge-shaped building for about twenty seconds. The wedge-shaped building looks back. I would like to tell you the wedge-shaped building can actually see Oriel, because in a way it can, but I do not want to overclaim. The wedge-shaped building is aware. Let us say aware. The wedge-shaped building is a friendly building. The wedge-shaped building has, over its century of life, developed a fondness for short architects in tall hats. Oriel and the wedge-shaped building have an understanding. The understanding is wordless and has been going on for fifteen years.

Oriel continues east. On Park Avenue South, at about 25th, Oriel pauses again, not for any particular building, but because the air smells, suddenly, strongly of tea. The smell is coming from a tea shop that opened two weeks ago on the west side of the avenue, which Oriel has not been in. Oriel makes a mental note. Oriel will visit the tea shop next week. Tea shops that smell that strongly from the street are, Oriel has learned, usually good. I can confirm. The tea shop is owned by a woman from Sichuan named Jun, who has been sourcing teas since her twenties. Jun will be at the Ball tonight, actually, because Jun's partner is an architect who was invited, and Jun will be bringing, in her bag, a small paper sample of a particular Yunnan black tea that she intends to give to anyone at the Ball who seems to need it. Oriel will seem, to Jun, to need it. Oriel will receive the sample at about 10 p.m. Oriel will make the tea the next morning. Oriel will return to the tea shop that afternoon. Jun and Oriel are going to become friends. I am arranging it. I cannot wait.

Oriel turns north on Park Avenue South. Park Avenue South becomes Park Avenue at 32nd Street, and the tulips begin. The tulips on Park are one of my best performances. I put them in every April. The Park Avenue Malls Fund plants them; I take credit anyway, because I choose the weather that welcomes them, and because the tulips, once planted, are mine. The tulips are yellow and white this year. Yellow because I asked for yellow, through a series of invisible arrangements that culminated in the fund manager's five-year-old granddaughter saying, one evening in October 2025, over dinner, 'Yellow.' The fund manager was, at that moment, asking the granddaughter what color tulips the girl preferred, partly as a joke. The granddaughter said, Yellow. The fund manager ordered the yellow bulbs. I was listening. I am always listening. I arranged the girl's saying so. Yellow tulips were, nine months ago, the preparation for this afternoon. I have been preparing for this afternoon for some time.

Oriel walks up Park with yellow tulips on both sides. The cone on Oriel's head, yellow, corresponds perfectly. A passing photographer—a young woman with a film camera, who has been walking her dog, and who has just stopped, and who is putting the leash around her wrist so she can lift the camera—takes a photograph. The young woman does not ask. The young woman takes the photograph quickly, apologetically, and waves to Oriel afterward, as if to confess. Oriel waves back. The young woman's name is Marguerite Onwuka; she is twenty-eight; she is going to develop the photograph next week; she is going to submit it to a small photography competition; she is going to win the competition; the photograph is going to be published in the catalogue of a city museum in 2027. Oriel, wearing a yellow cone amid yellow tulips on Park Avenue in late April 2026, is going to be one of the most reproduced photographs of the Ball, aside from the one of all nine taken later. I am pleased in advance. Marguerite is going to have a good career.

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On Park at 40th Street, Oriel stops to rest. A bench on the median is available. Oriel sits. Oriel takes the cone off—this is the first time Oriel has removed the cone since putting it on an hour ago—and sets it on the bench beside them. The cone, without Oriel inside it, is small. It is a yellow object about two feet tall, solitary, attractive, a little comic. Oriel leans back on the bench and closes their eyes. Three minutes pass. An older man sits down on the other end of the bench. The man is wearing a brown suit and carrying a thin leather briefcase. The man glances at the cone, glances at Oriel, and decides to say nothing. Oriel appreciates this. Oriel opens their eyes. Oriel and the man sit in silence for another minute.

Eventually the man says: 'You're an architect.'

Oriel: 'How did you know?'

The man: 'Only architects carry buildings.'

Oriel laughs. The man smiles. The man stands up. The man adjusts his briefcase. The man says: 'Build more of those. I like them,' and gestures at the cone. The man walks off northward. Oriel does not ask the man's name. Oriel senses that the man does not want to be asked. Oriel is right. The man's name is David Lasansky, and he is seventy-one, and he was, until six years ago, a professor of urban planning at the university, and he has designed, in his career, exactly zero buildings, but has guided—through his teaching—perhaps two thousand buildings into being,

mostly through the students he mentored. David is one of the great invisible architects of my island. David is walking north, right now, to a dental appointment. David is going to die in 2031. Oriel is going to, in 2028, receive a letter from David that surprises Oriel: David will have remembered the bench, the cone, the yellow tulips, and will write to say he has followed Oriel's career and he is proud. Oriel is going to cry at the letter. Oriel is going to write back. David and Oriel are going to have a brief, deep correspondence over David's last three years. Oriel will attend David's memorial. David has no children. Oriel will be the one who speaks at the memorial, because Oriel will have, by that time, become one of the people who loved David. I am arranging it. I am always arranging. I am the island. The benches on Park Avenue are my preferred venue.

Oriel puts the cone back on. Oriel resumes walking.

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By the time Oriel reaches 45th Street on Park, Oriel is very tired. Oriel's neck aches. The cone is, in spite of Desmond's balancing, heavier than Oriel anticipated. Oriel is considering, for the first time, the possibility that Oriel will not make it the rest of the way. Oriel is considering calling a cab. Oriel is considering sitting down again. Oriel is considering, briefly, taking the cone off and walking with it in their arms, like a strange yellow baby. Oriel laughs a little at the idea and decides no. Oriel, in their deepest self, wants to arrive at the Hotel the way Oriel began: with the tower on their head, not in their arms. A tower-dweller does not carry their tower. A tower-dweller lives in it.

But Oriel is not going to make it without one more rest. Oriel turns east on 45th, then north on Madison. Oriel is going to take a longer route: Madison to 57th, 57th east to Park, and down Park to 49th. The longer route allows more pauses. Oriel paces slowly.

On Madison at 53rd, outside a bookstore, Oriel pauses again. Oriel looks in the window. The window display contains, today, a single book turned face-out: a large photography book titled, in white type on a black cover, The Color Yellow. Oriel stares at the book. Oriel has never seen this book before. Oriel has not heard of this book. Oriel does not know whether the book is new, or old, or whether the bookstore has put it in the window today specifically because some deep and invisible arrangement has conspired toward this moment, which is, of course, exactly what has

happened, because I arranged for the bookstore's window-dresser, Nia, to select The Color Yellow this morning, though I did this not by compulsion but by the gentle influence of a dream Nia had last night about her mother, who wore yellow kitchen aprons. Nia picked up the book off the shelf this morning without fully understanding why, walked it to the window, placed it in the display. The bookstore manager said 'Huh, that's an old one, why that?' Nia said 'I felt like it today.' The manager said 'Okay.' I love Nia. I love the manager. I love the book. I love the window.

Oriel looks at the book for about fifteen seconds. Oriel does not go in. Oriel will come back next week, and buy it, and keep it on the drafting table for a year. Right now Oriel moves on, because Oriel wants to conserve energy.

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At 57th and Madison, Oriel catches up to a short person in a gabled yellow house walking very quickly in the same direction. This is Jasper. You already know what happens next; I told you, in Jasper's chapter, about the bench and the sitting and the sharing of the M. Island name, and the realization that at least three of them are at it. I will not retell. I will only tell you the small things I did not tell you in Jasper's chapter, from Oriel's side.

When Oriel sees the yellow house on Jasper, Oriel does not, as Celestine did, feel the need to gasp. Oriel's reaction is quieter. Oriel's reaction is a kind of steadying. Oriel has been walking alone for an hour and fifteen minutes. Oriel has been so alone, for so long, that Oriel has almost forgotten that anyone else exists on this particular track. Oriel sees Jasper's yellow house and thinks, without words, a thought whose closest translation is: of course. Of course there is another one. Of course I am not singular. Of course this is a pattern, not a coincidence. Of course.

And Oriel is, for a moment, relieved beyond expression. The loneliness of the commission—which Oriel has carried, for nine months, as a beloved secret—turns out to have been shared. Oriel has been a tower-dweller in the specific sense that Oriel has always meant: one of a vertical array of single floors, each inhabited by a person who did not know about the others. Oriel has been solitary in Oriel's own architecture. The architecture of the commission is stacked.

There are eight other floors. Jasper is one. Jasper, wearing a yellow house, walking rapidly down Madison, is the nearest neighbor. Oriel suddenly, very much, wants to sit down.

Oriel does not know how to explain this to Jasper, because Oriel has not yet figured it out for themselves. Oriel says only: 'I'm sorry. I have to sit down.' The rest, you know. The bench, the stone, the pigeon, the conversation, the M. Island, the 'how many,' the silent walk together down Park. I have told it already.

I will tell you one more thing, from Oriel's side, that I left out of Jasper's chapter. When Oriel and Jasper reach the Hotel, and the doorman says huh and opens the door, Oriel pauses on the threshold for a full second and looks up at the hotel. The Hotel, from that angle, is a tower with a setback and a finial and a very long history. Oriel looks at it. The Hotel looks back. Oriel says, silently: I know you. I was born in Brazil but I know you. You are my grandparent. You are every tower's grandparent. Of course the Ball is here. Where else.

The Hotel replies, in a way no one but I and Oriel can feel: welcome, child. Walk in.

Oriel walks in. Jasper walks in beside them. The yellow cone and the yellow gabled house disappear into the lobby. The doorman shakes his head a little and smiles. Six down. Three to go. I will tell you about Finn now, though the walking has happened already. I will tell you about Finn anyway, because Finn's afternoon, in its preparation, was one of the great preparations.

SEVEN. Finn, Who Went as a Silo

Friday, April 24, 2026, 4:00 in the afternoon, West 46th Street

Finn Abernathy-Shah works in a former piano factory. I want to say this first because the former-piano-factory has shaped Finn's entire architectural practice, and because I have loved the former-piano-factory for a hundred and four years, and because I am, at this late date in my life, capable of being moved by the fact that a person I love has chosen, as their office, a building I love. The building is on West 46th Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, four stories of red brick with steel-framed industrial windows, built in 1922 as the Kleinmann & Schatz Piano Company, converted into studios in 1989, occupied continuously since. The second floor, north side, is Finn's. It is a long rectangular room, twelve hundred square feet, with nine of the original Kleinmann & Schatz windows facing north onto 46th. The light in this room is, between November and April, the softest north light on the block, and between May and October, the coolest north light on the block, and at no time of year does any direct sun enter. Finn, whose work involves a great deal of model-making and watercolor, has chosen this room specifically for the north light. Finn has been here for seven years. Finn is, as Finn will tell you, still in love with the windows.

Finn is thirty-six. Finn was born in Karachi, Pakistan, to a Pakistani father (Omar Shah, engineer) and a British-Caribbean mother (Imogen Abernathy, public health nurse), and spent the first eleven years of life in Karachi before the family moved to London, and then to New York in 2007, when Finn was eighteen and starting at the an art and architecture school downtown. Finn's parents now live in New Jersey; they are retired; they will not be at the Ball tonight, but they have been told about the Ball, and they have been promised a video call, and they have, in their living room in Summit, set up two folding chairs facing a phone on a stand so they can watch the video feed Finn's friends will be sending. Omar and Imogen are not going to understand much of what they see. They will understand, however, that Finn has a yellow silo on their head, and that Finn is in a room at the Hotel with other architects wearing other buildings, and Omar and Imogen are going to, at around 9:30 p.m., cry a little, and then make tea, and then watch the rest of the video while holding hands. I love Omar. I love Imogen. I love that they are holding hands. I will keep.

Finn's office has three employees: a senior associate named Deirdre (Irish, forty, left a big firm two years ago to work with Finn for less money and more joy), a project manager named Oleg (Russian, thirty-four, has a cat named Tangerine), and a summer intern named Asha who is currently a junior at a college uptown. Deirdre, Oleg, and Asha are all at the Hotel right now, helping to install the exhibition. They will not see Finn until seven. Finn has been alone in the office since two o'clock, which is when Finn came in after a long lunch with a potential client, and the silo has been on Finn's head since 3:40. Finn put the silo on twenty minutes ago and then sat down at the drafting table and did not move for fifteen minutes, because the silo is, in fact, fairly heavy, and Finn wanted to make sure Finn could wear the silo for four hours without serious neck trouble.

The silo is yellow, truncated, conical, with a small arched doorway cut into one side—the doorway big enough to see Finn's eyes through—and a flat top. Desmond has suggested that the flat top be used as a drink tray, because, Desmond has said, a flat top is a waste if it does not hold a drink. Finn has taken Desmond's advice. Finn has, in fact, practiced with a full glass of water on the top of the silo, and can, with reasonable care, walk twenty feet without spilling. Tonight, at the Ball, Finn intends to offer cocktails to other people, from the top of the silo, as a kind of party trick. The silo-as-bar is going to be, by 8:30 p.m., one of the most-photographed moments of the evening. Beatrix, when Beatrix sees it, is going to laugh for a full minute. I cannot wait.

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Finn is, by temperament, the easiest-going of the nine. Finn does not suffer from the anxiety Jasper suffers from. Finn does not have the stillness Celestine has. Finn does not have Oriel's fatigue. Finn is, on this particular afternoon, in a state of quiet good humor that I find myself, as the narrator, increasingly envious of. Finn has had a nap. Finn has eaten. Finn is not hungry or tired. Finn is wearing a silo on their head because it has been a long nine months and the silo is the visible punctuation at the end of the long nine months, and Finn is, without fuss, ready to go to the Ball.

The silo represents, for Finn, a philosophy Finn has been developing for fifteen years: that architecture's next great challenge is to accept what other people have finished using. Finn does not believe, as some architects do, that every new building should be new. Finn believes, as a matter of principle, that the world contains enough buildings already—barns, factories, piano

companies, silos, lumber yards, churches, firehouses—that were built with skill and have been abandoned or underused, and that the task of the architect in the twenty-first century is to make those buildings into homes. The silo, specifically, is Finn's love letter to the Midwestern grain elevator. Finn has been obsessed, since a road trip through Nebraska in 2019, with the grain elevator as a domestic form. The grain elevator is beautiful. The grain elevator is, Finn has argued in an essay published in a small journal in 2022, 'the most American structure.' The grain elevator, Finn has proposed, can be converted into a house for a single family or three or four; the shape is, once you think about it, domestic; the roundness holds a life the way the roundness held grain; the only difference is that a life is warmer, and louder, and generally messier.

M. Island's brief, when it arrived in Finn's email nine months ago, specified: 'a yellow building, cylindrical or conical, small, capable of being placed on any of several sites in the city, domestic, evoking storage or protection.' Finn, reading the brief, had the distinct sensation that the client had read Finn's essay. Finn was, at the time, both flattered and slightly suspicious. Finn thought: who is this. Finn thought: whoever this is, has done their homework. Finn thought: this is exactly my brief. Finn thought: this is almost too much my brief. Finn has been designing the resulting silo with a mixture of delight (because it is precisely what Finn wanted to make) and a kind of skeptical intelligence (because Finn wanted to make sure Finn was making the silo, and not making a silo in the voice someone had set up for Finn to perform).

I can tell Finn: you are making your silo. The brief was mine. I wrote it to you because I knew you were the one to design it. I am sorry if the brief seemed suspiciously like your own thought; I learned how to listen to you because I have been, for seven years, your landlord's landlord, and I have overheard everything. Finn will, when Finn learns this tonight, laugh. Finn is going to laugh a lot tonight.

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At 4:02, Finn stands up from the drafting table. Finn puts on the white pinstripe jacket that matches the white pinstripe trousers. Finn takes a last look at the office. The office is in good order. The drafting table has, on it, a scroll of drawings for the silo's final design, weighted at one corner by a brass compass that Finn's father gave Finn for college graduation. The drawings will stay on the table over the weekend. Monday morning Finn will come back. The office and Finn have an understanding.

Finn goes down the stairs. The stairs are original. The stairs were installed in 1922 for the piano movers of Kleinmann & Schatz, and they are wide, reinforced, slightly rubberized, meant to allow the rolling of heavy grand pianos from the second floor to the street. A hundred and four years of rolling, scratching, and occasional dropping has given the stairs a patina that no contemporary staircase could achieve. Finn has always loved these stairs. Finn has, on many evenings, paused on them to listen for the ghosts of the pianos. Finn has, on a few evenings, heard them. I can tell you: the pianos are there. The stairs remember the pianos. The stairs remember all the pianos. The stairs are going to remember Finn too, someday, when Finn moves out of this office, which will not be for another thirty years.

Finn reaches the ground floor. The building's front door is propped open with a brick. Finn steps out onto West 46th Street. The silo goes first.

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West 46th Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues is what is left of a neighborhood that used to be industrial and is now transitional. On the south side of the street: a plumbing supply wholesaler, a private parking garage, a recording studio, Finn's piano factory, a modest apartment building, a storefront church. On the north side: a grocery, a laundromat, a small park the size of a dumpster, a community garden, a row of brownstones being quietly renovated, a new residential tower covered in white terra-cotta panels that Finn has been, for three years, trying to decide whether to love. I will tell you: the tower is not going to be loved by Finn for another four years, at which point Finn will realize that the tower is, despite its corporate appearance, a generous building—that it has ground-floor retail, that its shadow does not reach 46th Street until after dark, that its residents have, collectively, been good neighbors. Finn will, in 2030, pass the tower and nod to it. The tower will, in its way, nod back. All my buildings eventually come around.

Finn walks east. Finn is going to the great train station first—the S shuttle from Times Square to the great train station, the one-stop subway that is the fastest way in the city to move crosstown between 42nd Street's two main hubs—and then walking north and east to the Hotel. Finn has decided on this route because Finn's silo, while light, has a diameter that would, Finn suspects, not fit through the doors of the regular subway cars. The S shuttle, however, has very slightly wider doors, and Finn has checked. The silo will fit. Finn tested it at the 42nd Street

entrance to the S last weekend, in a dry run, which Finn did not tell anyone about because Finn did not want to seem anxious. Finn is not anxious. Finn is simply a thorough person.

On the corner of 46th and Tenth, a boy of about eight—wearing a soccer uniform, holding a soccer ball, accompanied by a man who is presumably his father—stops in the middle of the crosswalk. The boy points. The boy says, in Spanish: 'Papá, mira.' The father says, 'Dios mío.' The family's name, for the record, is Morales. The boy is Mateo. The father is Rafael. Rafael works as a line cook at a restaurant six blocks away. Rafael is on his one day off, taking Mateo to soccer practice, which is, actually, at 4:30 in a small field by the river. They are going to be slightly late to practice because of stopping in the middle of the street to look at the silo, and Mateo's coach, a man named Coach Lin, is going to mention this in a slightly annoyed tone, but Rafael is going to say, 'We saw something you would not believe,' and Coach Lin is going to look at the two of them and the way the boy is bouncing on his feet and ask, 'Was it good?' and Rafael is going to say, 'Yes. It was good,' and Coach Lin, who has been a Queens soccer coach for twenty-one years and has excellent instincts for what is and isn't good, is going to smile and say, 'Okay, Mateo, get in line.' Mateo is going to play the best soccer of his young life at that practice. He is going to score twice. He is going to tell his mother about the yellow silo at dinner, and his mother is going to be skeptical, and Mateo is going to describe the silo in such detail—a yellow hat big as his father's torso, worn by a tall person in white pinstripes on West 46th Street, and it had a little door and you could see the person's eyes—that Mateo's mother is going to believe him, and is going to say, 'New York. Only in New York.'

Only in New York. I could not have written the line better myself.

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Finn walks east on 46th. Ninth Avenue. Eighth Avenue. Times Square. Finn has been, for seven years, a daily commuter through Times Square, which is not something most Manhattanites would freely choose, and which Finn has grown to appreciate as a kind of daily necessary immersion in the pulse of the city. Times Square, to Finn, is an old friend one does not always enjoy seeing but always greets with affection. Today Finn is not walking through Times Square; Finn is descending into the Sunday paper Square subway station at 42nd and Seventh, heading for the S shuttle. The station at 4:25 is moderately crowded, a commuter rush beginning to build. Finn, wearing the silo, descends the stairs slowly. The silo is balanced. Finn swipes through. Finn

goes to the S platform. A train is waiting, as trains are always waiting on the S, because the S runs in a tight loop.

Finn steps onto the train. The silo clears the door by about three inches. Finn takes up a position in the middle of the car. The train is about three-quarters full: commuters, tourists, two nuns, a delivery man with a large white bag emitting the smell of Thai food, a young woman in a ballet practice outfit, a man playing chess with himself on a small pocket set. None of them notices Finn at first. One by one, they do. The young woman in ballet clothes notices first; she smiles, a bright, complicated smile, and does not look away. The two nuns notice next; they lean toward each other and whisper in Spanish. The delivery man, busy with his phone, glances up, notices, and grins. The chess-player does not notice for another minute, because the chess-player is deep in his chess, and when he does notice, he says, audibly, to himself, 'Huh,' and then returns to the chess. The car, in aggregate, begins to radiate a faint, shared amusement that is one of the great New York phenomena: a public recognition of something absurd, which no one will discuss, but which everyone will enjoy silently in common.

I love the S shuttle. The S shuttle is, to me, the most compressed unit of New York consciousness we have. Forty-two-second journey, end to end. Everyone is going the same direction, for the same length of time, at the same pace. The S is a small poem that resets every ninety seconds. I have loved the S for a century, and I have watched, on it, ten thousand small comedies and three thousand small tragedies and countless small kindnesses and small meetings-that-became-somethings. Tonight the S contains Finn in the yellow silo, and a ballet student, and two nuns, and a chess-player, and a delivery man, and everyone is going to get off at the great train station and forget they rode with a silo on their heads. Well—almost everyone. The ballet student is going to remember. The ballet student is going to, for the rest of her life, when asked about the strangest thing she ever saw in New York, begin the answer: 'Well, once on the S shuttle...' I am keeping her. Her name is Elena Savchenko. She is twenty-three. She will, in 2040, be a principal dancer at a major ballet company. The silo will be her anecdote.

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the great train station. Finn exits the station. Finn crosses the great concourse. The concourse is, as always, swarming. Finn in the yellow silo is not the strangest thing in the concourse right now—there is also a man dressed as a torch-bearing figure, and a school group of fifty

fifth-graders, and an elderly couple who are lost and consulting a paper map, and a woman pushing twins in a stroller and carrying, on one hip, a toddler in a tiger costume. The concourse absorbs all of them without comment. Finn walks through. The clock in the middle, the great round one, reads 4:38. The information booth, inside the clock, is staffed by a woman named Genevieve who has worked there for twenty-nine years. Genevieve sees the silo. Genevieve nods to Finn as Finn passes. Finn nods back. Neither of them has ever spoken to the other. Neither of them will. But they have, for years, recognized each other in this room, and today they recognized each other again, and Genevieve, when Finn has passed, mutters to the window of the info booth: 'Good for you, silo. Good for you.' I am keeping Genevieve. Genevieve is going to have a good shift tonight. I arrange these things.

Finn exits onto Vanderbilt. Finn turns north. Finn walks the four blocks up Vanderbilt to where it becomes Park, then continues up Park to 49th. Finn is, by this point, counting. Finn is looking for other yellow houses. Finn suspects, increasingly, that there will be others. Finn does not yet know this for certain. Finn has been, until the silo-fitting three weeks ago, under the impression that M. Island was an eccentric developer who had commissioned Finn alone. Finn had, over the last two weeks, begun to doubt this, because a conversation with an old classmate—a structural engineer who had worked on one of Celestine's projects—had revealed that the classmate, completely independently, was consulting on a yellow project with a client called M. Island. Finn did not say anything at the time. Finn had gone home and stared at the ceiling for an hour. Finn had decided not to investigate further. Finn has preferred to let the Ball settle it. Finn's temperament is: let things come. Finn is, in this respect, the least impatient of the nine. Finn is willing to walk all the way to the Hotel without knowing anything. Finn will find out when Finn finds out.

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At 44th and Park, Finn sees the fifth yellow house—which is, to Finn, the first yellow house other than Finn's own—and it is Tamsin, wearing the wedge-shed, stopping on the corner and laughing. I have described the scene in Tamsin's chapter. I will now describe it from Finn's side.

Finn sees Tamsin from half a block away. Finn sees, instantly, that what Finn is looking at is another yellow house on another person. Finn's first reaction is: there it is. Finn's second reaction is: that is a wedge. Finn's third reaction is: Tamsin. It must be. I don't know anyone else who

would make a wedge. Finn is correct. Finn and Tamsin have not met, but Finn has, as I mentioned earlier, heard Tamsin speak on a panel, and the panel included a slide of one of Tamsin's projects, and the project included a wedge. The wedge registered. Finn is, without knowing it, already semi-acquainted with Tamsin's architectural vocabulary.

Finn stops on the corner of 44th and watches Tamsin laugh. The laugh goes on for a surprisingly long time. Finn does not laugh along. Finn simply watches, bemused. Finn is, at heart, an observer. Finn often takes a beat before reacting. The woman next to Tamsin who begins laughing also—Finn sees her laugh too. Finn appreciates both of them. Finn does not join in yet. Finn waits for the laughter to subside. Tamsin looks up, sees Finn, and crosses the avenue. Finn says, calmly, 'Hi.'

You already know the rest of the conversation. I described it in the Tamsin chapter. The two of them walk together to the Hotel. They arrive at 4:58. The doorman, on his fifth and sixth of the day, is beginning to lose the battle to look unsurprised. The doorman is, in fact, beginning to feel that something historic is happening in his doorway. The doorman's name is Arturo. Arturo has been a Hotel doorman since 2011. Arturo has worked five Beaux-Arts Balls at the Hotel. Arturo has never seen a single guest come to a Beaux-Arts Ball dressed as a building. Arturo has always thought it was a shame, given the history. Arturo is, privately, overjoyed. Arturo is going to, at the end of the night, when the last yellow house has gone home, sit down on the brass bench inside the entrance and wipe his eyes. Arturo is going to tell his wife Marisol over breakfast tomorrow: 'I saw the 1931 photograph come back to life. I saw it happen. Ninety-five years. I saw it.' Marisol is going to pour him more coffee and say, 'Of course you did. That's why we live here.'

Finn and Tamsin cross the threshold. Seven down. Two to go. I am going to tell you about Ludmila next, because Ludmila, remember, was the one Inez saw running east at Lexington at the end of Chapter One. Ludmila was always going to be early and late simultaneously, because Ludmila is the kind of person who is always running. I love Ludmila. I will catch her up.

EIGHT. Ludmila, Who Went as a Tenement

Friday, April 24, 2026, 3:30 in the afternoon, East 34th Street

Ludmila Petrov-Weng is late. Ludmila has always been late. Ludmila has been late to everything since the age of six, when Ludmila was late to her own birthday party, because Ludmila was on the sixth-floor landing of her family's walk-up on Second Avenue talking to her neighbor Mrs. Cheng about a cat. Ludmila has never, in the intervening thirty-eight years, been on time for anything. Ludmila's lateness is not the lateness of disrespect. Ludmila's lateness is the lateness of a person who, in every transition, finds a conversation that becomes more important than the destination. Ludmila was late to her own wedding—she married Ethan in 2019; the wedding was in a small garden in Brooklyn; the groom waited thirty-four minutes; the groom was not angry; the groom, in fact, married Ludmila partly because of Ludmila's capacity to be delayed by other people. Ethan is a patient, loving, kind man who understands that Ludmila is a city person in the oldest sense, which means Ludmila is going to get waylaid. Ethan will be at the Ball tonight. Ethan is in Murray Hill right now at their apartment, already dressed in a navy suit, reading a book on the couch, waiting for the time to leave. Ethan will be on time. Ethan always is. That is how the partnership works.

Ludmila is forty-four. Ludmila was born in 1982 in the same apartment on Second Avenue where Ludmila lived until the age of twenty-two. The apartment was a fourth-floor walk-up—though, as I mentioned in the introduction, and as Ludmila has corrected me countless times, it was a sixth-floor walk-up, because Ludmila insists—two bedrooms, one bathroom, a tiny kitchen, a fire escape. Ludmila's mother is Ying Weng, from Taipei, came to New York in 1979, works still at seventy-two as a seamstress in Chinatown. Ludmila's father is Boris Petrov, from Leningrad, came in 1980, worked for forty years as a locksmith, retired in 2023, also still in the apartment on Second. Ying and Boris met at a community center on Orchard Street in 1981. They were both taking English classes. They got married six months later. Their English is still, forty-five years later, the English of two immigrants who learned it together as adults, which means Ying and Boris speak to each other in a third language, half Mandarin and half Russian with English connective tissue, that is spoken by no one else on earth and that I, the island, consider one of my rarest possessions.

Ludmila grew up bilingual in this third language. Ludmila's Mandarin is now excellent, Ludmila's Russian is now fluent, Ludmila's English is New York English with particular inflections you cannot get except by growing up on East 2nd between Avenue B and Avenue A—no, I mean, between Second Avenue and the Bowery—no, I mean—where did I just say. Second Avenue. Ludmila grew up on Second Avenue. Between 2nd Street and Houston. Yes. Ludmila grew up in a tenement building that had been built in 1903 as a tenement, designated as a tenement in the parlance of the time, with shared hall bathrooms in the original blueprints (later converted, after the Tenement House Act, to private bathrooms squeezed into whatever closet could be found). Ludmila's childhood tenement, by the time Ludmila lived in it, had private bathrooms, but the bathroom was the size of a coat closet, and the kitchen was the size of a bathroom, and the bedrooms were the size of kitchens, and the living room—which doubled as Ludmila's parents' bedroom after Ludmila was ten—was the size of what other people would call a bedroom. The whole apartment was maybe six hundred square feet. Five of Ludmila's cousins lived in identical apartments on the same block. The apartment directly above Ludmila's belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Torres, who had a son named Raul who was Ludmila's first crush. The apartment directly below belonged to Mrs. Cheng, who had the cat. The building, by the time Ludmila was a teenager, was a small world—fifteen apartments, forty-three people, a series of vertically stacked lives that Ludmila has, her entire career, been trying to reproduce in her own architecture.

This is why Ludmila designs, as I mentioned, reimagined tenements. Ludmila calls them, in professional contexts, 'community-scale multi-unit housing.' Ludmila calls them, when tired, 'the buildings I am trying to give people who did not have my mother.' Ludmila has completed four such buildings in her career: one in Jackson Heights, one in Crown Heights, one in Harlem, one in Sunset Park. All four are small—four to six stories—dense, communal, with shared staircases and front stoops and bathrooms that are properly sized, because Ludmila is not nostalgic about the old bathrooms. Ludmila wants the good parts of the tenement (the proximity, the cousins) and not the bad parts (the bathrooms, the tuberculosis). Ludmila is, in this respect, one of the most practical of the nine. Ludmila is also, not coincidentally, the only one of the nine with children. Ludmila has two, a six-year-old named Mei and a three-year-old named Ivan, who are both, at this moment, at Ludmila's mother Ying's apartment on Second Avenue, being babysat while their parents go to the Ball. Mei and Ivan have been told Ludmila is going 'to a party in a

big hotel.' Mei and Ivan have been told Ludmila will be wearing 'a funny hat.' Mei and Ivan have been promised that Ludmila will come pick them up in the morning. Mei and Ivan are, at this moment, making dumplings with Ying. Mei is rolling. Ivan is, mostly, eating dough.

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Ludmila's day so far: Ludmila woke at 6:30 with Ivan. Ludmila made breakfast. Ludmila dropped Mei at school and Ivan at the preschool on East 32nd. Ludmila went to the office on East 34th—three blocks from the apartment—and worked until lunch. Ludmila had lunch with a client, a developer named Aisha Khan who is one of the very few developers Ludmila has been able to tolerate for a decade-long working relationship, at a restaurant in Koreatown. Ludmila came back to the office. Ludmila, at 2:30, started putting on the house. The house took longer to get on than Ludmila had planned. The house weighs more than Ludmila had anticipated, even though Ludmila had lifted it many times before putting it on. Ludmila had, at 3:30, been planning to take a leisurely twenty-minute walk to the Hotel. Ludmila realized at 3:40 that Ludmila had not made the necessary childcare arrangements for the drop-off at Ying's apartment, because Ludmila had forgotten that Ying's apartment is on the Lower East Side and that Ivan, who attends preschool on East 32nd, would need to be picked up and transported to Ying's. Ludmila had called Ying. Ying had been unsurprised. Ying had agreed to handle the pickup. Ludmila had then realized that she had not picked up the formal shoes from the shoemaker on Third Avenue, which Ludmila had planned to do at lunchtime and had forgotten. Ludmila had taken the house off, put on normal shoes, run to the shoemaker, collected the shoes (they were lovely, cream-colored, low-heeled, just right), run back, changed into the shoes, put the house back on, and now, at 4:45, was running about an hour behind. Ludmila was going to have to take a cab. Ludmila was going to have to take a cab and also still walk some, because the Ball, Ludmila had decided, still deserved a walk, just a shorter one.

At 4:50, Ludmila stepped out of her office building on East 34th Street with the yellow two-story cone-house on her head, hailed a taxi, got in—the two-story cone-house fit in the taxi only because it was a minivan—told the driver the Hotel, and spent the twenty-block ride trying not to hyperventilate. Ludmila does not hyperventilate often. Ludmila is, in ordinary life, a very calm person. But Ludmila has been, for the last hour, aware of a sensation Ludmila has not felt in years, which is the sensation of not being able to do everything Ludmila wants to do. Ludmila has

felt this for nine months actually, in a creeping way: the commission for M. Island has coincided with Ivan starting preschool and with Mei starting first grade and with Ethan's father dying in August, a loss that has made Ethan quieter for months, and with the winding-down of a long project in Sunset Park, and with the starting-up of the proposal phase for a new project in Brownsville, and with the ordinary ongoing management of Ludmila's firm, which has eleven employees, and with, always, the children. Ludmila has arrived at this Friday in April running on a deficit of sleep, of eating properly, of time for oneself. Ludmila is the most depleted of the nine, and I know it, and I am sorry, and I am going to fix it.

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This is where I have to step in as the narrator and say: I arranged for Ludmila to have a cab driver named Sidi. I want you to know I arranged it. I usually do not interfere directly with the taxi dispatching, because the taxi dispatchers are not, strictly speaking, in my jurisdiction. But today I called in a favor. I said to the dispatchers, in the only language the dispatchers and I share, which is the language of red lights and green lights and the particular patterning of taxi arrivals at particular corners: send Sidi. Get him to 34th and Third by 4:50. Make it happen. And the dispatchers did. Sidi is forty-nine. Sidi is from Senegal. Sidi has been driving a taxi in New York for eighteen years. Sidi has four children. Sidi is, without question, one of the kindest men on my island. I did not want Ludmila to ride with anyone else today. I got her Sidi.

Sidi, in the rearview mirror, looks at the woman in the yellow two-story cone-house strapped into the back seat. Sidi says, in a voice of extraordinary gentleness: 'Miss, are you all right?'

Ludmila, who has been breathing shallow for five minutes, exhales. Ludmila says: 'I'm okay. Thank you. I'm just—I'm late. And tired.'

Sidi: 'Miss, when I was young, I was late one day. My mother said to me, she said, Sidi, when you are late, remember: the world has made room for you. You are not arriving behind the world. You are arriving in the place the world has left for you. Miss, I tell you this because you look like you need it.'

Ludmila, inside the yellow house, begins, quietly, to cry. Not sobbing. Just a steady slow releasing. Ludmila has not cried in a cab since she was in her twenties. Ludmila has not, frankly, cried at all in three years, since Ethan's father's funeral. Ludmila is crying now because Sidi's

mother has just reached through Sidi and across seven thousand miles and twenty years and said exactly the right thing to Ludmila in the back seat of a heading north on Park Avenue. Ludmila says, eventually: 'Sir. Thank you.'

Sidi: 'Nothing. Nothing. I tell you because my mother tells me. Now she is in heaven. She still tells me. I pass it along.'

The cab stops at 42nd and Park. Sidi says: 'Miss, you want to walk the rest?'

Ludmila, who realizes Sidi has been reading her posture and concluding correctly: 'Yes.'

Sidi: 'I will stop here.'

Sidi pulls over. Ludmila pays. Sidi refuses the tip at first. Ludmila insists. Sidi accepts. Sidi turns around in the seat and looks at Ludmila directly. Sidi says: 'Miss. Whatever you are going to do tonight. Do it. You are not late. You are on time for the thing the world is holding for you.'

Ludmila, through the yellow house, says: 'What's your name?'

Sidi: 'Sidi Diouf.'

Ludmila: 'I am Ludmila. I am an architect. If I can ever help you. Come to the office. East 34th and Lexington. Ask for Ludmila.'

Sidi: 'Miss. I do not need help. I have four children and they are all good. But thank you.'

Ludmila steps out of the cab. Sidi pulls away. Ludmila stands on the corner of 42nd and Park in the yellow two-story cone-house, which has a small chimney on top that is faintly steaming, because Desmond built in a smoke machine (yes, a smoke machine; Desmond was very proud of this; Ludmila turned it on this morning; it runs on a small cartridge), and the chimney is, at this moment, emitting a thin plume of theater-smoke into the April air. The chimney-smoke catches the late afternoon light. Ludmila, who has just stopped crying, smiles. Ludmila begins to walk north on Park. Ludmila is, as instructed by Sidi's mother, arriving on time for the thing the world is holding.

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I want to tell you about Ludmila's house. The house is a two-story cone. It is the tallest of the nine costumes, not counting Oriel's cone, which is a pure spire; Ludmila's is a squat two-level

arrangement, meant to evoke the stacking of tenement floors. The first story (at Ludmila's shoulders) is a slightly wider cone, with one window on each of the four sides—the four windows of the first floor, each painted yellow with black frames, each slightly differently sized, in the way tenement windows always are. The second story (above the first) is a narrower cone, smaller, with two windows only—suggesting the upper-floor apartments, which have fewer windows, because tenements get lighter at the bottom and tighter at the top. A small chimney tops the whole thing. A steady trickle of smoke is coming out of it. The whole house, seen from outside, is a portrait of stacked intimacy—of people living on top of each other because they love each other, or at least because they have learned to count on each other, which is, Ludmila has argued, the beginning of love.

Ludmila designed the house for M. Island exactly this way. Ludmila designed, specifically, a six-story tenement—an actual building, to be built on a lot M. Island would select—that would replicate, for a new generation, the vertical village Ludmila grew up in. Ludmila has been, for nine months, preparing the drawings. The drawings are, Ludmila knows, the best work Ludmila has ever done. Ludmila has been wanting, for her whole career, to give someone else what Ludmila had growing up. Ludmila has made, for M. Island, a building that would do it.

M. Island has not yet chosen the lot. Ludmila has been, in her sleepless way, wondering which lot it will be. Ludmila has narrowed the possibilities down to six, based on the structural assumptions built into the design. Ludmila has thought, in the shower, in the last three weeks, about all six. Ludmila has a favorite. Ludmila has not told M. Island. Ludmila's favorite is a lot on Delancey Street, a corner lot, currently a parking garage, two blocks from Ludmila's parents' building. Ludmila has not dared to hope. Ludmila has decided the hoping is bad luck.

I can tell Ludmila: you got it right. It is Delancey. I chose it six months ago. I have been waiting to surprise you. Tonight, at the Ball, in front of everyone, I am going to tell you. I am going to say: Ludmila, you have designed the building that is going to replace the parking garage two blocks from your parents. Your building is going to stand next door to the bodega where you bought your first pack of gum. Your cousins are going to live above you, if they want, and below you, if they want. I am going to put you back. I am going to put you back where you grew up. I am going to make the tenement you dreamed of. And I am going to do the same, in various ways, for the other eight. But I am particularly going to do this for you. And you, Ludmila, you are going to sit down in the Grand Ballroom when I say it, and you are going to cry, and Ethan is

going to hold your hand, and I am going to have arranged it so that at that exact moment the lighting technician—without knowing why—lifts a single spotlight just a little, and the light catches the yellow of your two-story cone, and the room sees you. This is planned. This is happening tonight.

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But for now, Ludmila is walking up Park. On the corner of 47th and Park, Ludmila sees her first other yellow house. It is Beatrix. Beatrix is, coincidentally or not, walking parallel to Ludmila on the other side of the avenue—Beatrix has taken a slightly different route, and the two of them have converged without either realizing. Beatrix is wearing the yellow bell-house: a gentle swelling cone, pinkish-yellow, with a small arched doorway, also light. Ludmila sees the bell. Ludmila stops. Ludmila blinks. Ludmila says, to no one: 'Are you kidding me.'

Beatrix does not yet see Ludmila, because Beatrix's cone has limited peripheral sightlines. Beatrix is continuing north. Ludmila, recovering, crosses Park—carefully, the two-story house tilting slightly with the haste—and catches up to Beatrix on the other sidewalk. Ludmila says, from about three feet behind Beatrix: 'Excuse me.'

Beatrix turns, slowly. Beatrix sees Ludmila. Beatrix's mouth opens. Beatrix says: 'No.'

Ludmila: 'Yes.'

Beatrix: 'No. No. No.'

Ludmila: 'Yes. Yes. Yes.'

Beatrix: 'M. Island?'

Ludmila: 'M. Island.'

Beatrix: 'I knew it. I knew it. I have been suspecting for two weeks. I knew it. Ludmila. Ludmila Petrov-Weng? Is that you?'

Ludmila, astonished that Beatrix knows her name: 'Yes. You are—'

Beatrix: 'Beatrix Hollander-Quiñones.'

Ludmila: 'Beatrix. We have met. We have—we were on a panel together. 2021.'

Beatrix: 'We were on a panel together. Oh my God.'

They stand on the sidewalk on Park between 47th and 48th, with their two yellow houses, laughing. They laugh for about forty seconds. A tourist takes a picture. An executive in a suit slows down, looks at them, shakes his head, and keeps walking. The traffic goes by. The buildings look on. I am, behind them, in the avenue, grinning.

Ludmila: 'How many do you think there are?'

Beatrix: 'I don't know. I saw someone earlier. A cube. Two-tone. Pinstripes. I was across 34th. We didn't cross.'

Ludmila: 'Oh.'

Beatrix: 'How many have you seen?'

Ludmila: 'I haven't. You're my first.'

Beatrix: 'Well. Hi.'

Ludmila: 'Hi.'

They walk the last blocks together. They walk up Park, turn onto 49th, approach the Hotel. They arrive at 5:20. The doorman, Arturo, who has by now admitted six yellow houses, sees numbers seven and eight approach together. Arturo decides, in this moment, that he is experiencing the single most extraordinary evening of his professional life. Arturo smiles. Arturo opens the door wide. Arturo says, 'Good evening, ladies'—and then corrects himself, because Ludmila is the first of the nine who he has figured out might not be a lady—'good evening, friends.' Ludmila smiles inside the two-story cone. Ludmila says, 'Thank you, Arturo.' Arturo is surprised that Ludmila knows his name. Arturo does not realize—though I know—that Ludmila has come to the Hotel for drinks with her mother once a year, every year, on her mother's birthday, for twenty years, and Arturo has been the doorman at seven of those visits, and Ludmila has always noticed the name tag, and Ludmila is the kind of person who remembers. Arturo is, actually, going to remember this later tonight and be very moved.

Ludmila and Beatrix cross into the Hotel together. Eight down. One to go. Beatrix is, as you will remember, the one the island has been waiting for. I will tell you about Beatrix now, and then we will have all nine inside the hotel, and then we will begin the Ball.

NINE. Beatrix, Who Went as a Bell

Friday, April 24, 2026, 4:15 in the afternoon, Pearl Street

Beatrix Hollander-Quiñones is the one I have been waiting for, and I want to be careful about how I say this, because I do not want to tell you Beatrix is better than the other eight. Beatrix is not better. Beatrix is not more. The nine of them are an arrangement, not a hierarchy. But Beatrix is the one I began with, nine months ago, when I first conceived of this commission—when I said, for the first time in my own mind, I am going to commission an architect to design a house for me to give away—and Beatrix's idea, the bell, is the idea I had first, and the idea that organized everything else. I went to Beatrix first. I went to Beatrix knowing I was going to go to eight others. Beatrix said yes. The other eight, then, arranged themselves around the yes of Beatrix, and became, each in turn, their own yeses, but Beatrix's yes was the yes that made the chord. I say this because I love Beatrix. I say this because Beatrix deserves to know, and so do you, that what is happening tonight began with a letter I wrote to Beatrix in July, on cream paper, in my best hand, which was then typed by Surjan and scanned and mailed, and which arrived at Beatrix's office on Pearl Street on a Monday morning, and which Beatrix read, standing in the doorway, at 9:15 a.m., and which Beatrix later said—to her partner, in bed, that night—was 'the strangest thing that has ever happened to me.' It was. It is. I am going to be strange tonight. I have been warming up.

Beatrix is fifty-two, the oldest of the nine. Beatrix has two children, an eighteen-year-old named Estela who is in her first year of college at Bard, and a fourteen-year-old named Rafa who is at home in their apartment in Red Hook watching the Ball preparation coverage on an obscure architectural podcast's YouTube livestream. Beatrix's partner of twenty-nine years is a sculptor named Lila Hollander, who is Jewish, and after whom Beatrix's partial surname comes; they were married in 2012 after the Hollander-Quiñones hyphenation, and have always been known, in their Red Hook circle, as the Hollander-Quiñoneses. Lila is going to be at the Ball tonight. Lila will arrive at 7:30 wearing a dress of her own making, which is made out of a kind of quilted bronze, and which is, in its way, its own costume—though Lila is not an architect, and is not going as a building, Lila has designed the dress to be a conversation-piece with Beatrix's bell. The dress has, near the collar, a small brass bell that makes a sound when Lila moves. Lila is going to walk into the Grand Ballroom at 7:38, and the bell on her collar will make a small tingling noise, and

Beatrix, from wherever Beatrix is standing, will hear it and turn, and Lila will see Beatrix in the yellow bell-house, and the two of them will meet each other's eyes, and the room will momentarily go quiet in the way rooms sometimes do. I am going to arrange all of this. I am going to make sure the room goes quiet. I have some influence over the acoustics of the Grand Ballroom.

Beatrix is a Bronx kid. Beatrix was born in 1974 to Soledad Quiñones, a nurse from Ponce, Puerto Rico, who arrived in New York at nineteen and worked at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital for thirty-five years. Beatrix's father is not known; he was a brief relationship Soledad does not like to discuss; Beatrix has, her entire life, not pressed the question, out of respect for her mother's composure. Soledad raised Beatrix alone in a two-bedroom apartment on Grand Concourse, near 170th, and Beatrix grew up with her grandmother Nilda (Soledad's mother, who lived with them until her death in 1996) and with three cousins, the children of Soledad's sister Ileana, who would come over for weekends that lasted a month. The apartment was loud. The apartment was full. The apartment was the loudest and fullest thing Beatrix ever lived in, and Beatrix has been, in every building she has ever designed, trying to achieve that loudness and fullness in a different register.

Beatrix was the first person in her family to go to college. Beatrix went to City College. Beatrix studied architecture. Beatrix graduated in 1997. Beatrix worked at two firms in the city for sixteen years, and in 2013 opened her own practice, which is called BHQ. The practice has, at this point, twelve employees and an office on Pearl Street in the Financial District—Beatrix chose Pearl Street because Pearl Street is one of the oldest streets in Manhattan, and because the name means pearl, and because Beatrix has been, for most of her career, trying to design buildings that are a kind of pearl: slow-formed, layered, made inside a closed place, and then opened. The office is on the seventh floor of a converted commercial building, small, crowded, full of plants, somewhat chaotic, loved. Beatrix's employees all call her Beatrix, never Ms. Hollander-Quiñones, and Beatrix's employees are, with two exceptions, all women or non-binary, which is a ratio Beatrix has been cultivating for a decade and which she will defend to anyone who asks, and sometimes without being asked.

Beatrix's work has, for a long time, revolved around a single idea: that the first public building in any human settlement is the bell. I do not mean this literally—most human settlements do not start with a bell tower—but I mean it in the way Beatrix means it, which is: the bell-idea, the idea

of a sound that calls people together, is the first thing that makes a place into a place. The bell, in Beatrix's understanding, is the kernel of the public. The bell says, come here. The bell says, we are gathering. The bell says, this is a place now; before the bell, it was just geography. Beatrix has, over twenty-nine years, designed buildings that attempt to do the bell's work. Community centers with towers. Libraries with campaniles. A small amphitheater in the Bronx that is, essentially, a bell laid on its side. One actual bell-installation on the Red Hook waterfront, commissioned in 2019, which rings at seven every evening, and which has, over seven years, accumulated a listenership—neighbors who come out at 7 p.m., dogs who pause in their evening walks, a small crowd of children who ring the bell themselves on Saturdays under a rotating adult supervisor system—which Beatrix has been quietly documenting and which Beatrix believes, reasonably, is her best completed work.

When I wrote to Beatrix in July, I asked for a bell. I asked for a small yellow building, yellow outside, yellow inside, with a bell-shape and a single doorway. I asked for a building that would make a sound. I asked for a building that would call people in. I did not say what people. I did not say where it would stand. I said: I want a bell. Beatrix, reading the letter that Monday morning, understood instantly. Beatrix wrote back that same evening. Beatrix said yes. Beatrix said she would need two months to prepare preliminary drawings. Beatrix said she would want to know, eventually, the site. Beatrix said she was honored. Beatrix had, I should tell you, not been expecting such a commission for a long time; Beatrix had been in a slight professional trough; Beatrix had been wondering, at fifty-two, whether she was going to spend the rest of her career doing the same three kinds of project in rotation. My letter arrived as, not coincidentally, exactly what Beatrix needed. I know. I can read a professional trough from space. I sent the letter when the trough was deepest. I am good at this.

Beatrix has been, for nine months, designing the bell. The design has gone through thirty-four iterations. Beatrix has settled, for the costume version Beatrix is wearing tonight, on a particular bell-form that is wider at the base and narrower at the top, soft-edged, with the arched doorway on one side at about the height of Beatrix's chest. The doorway, in the costume, is purely visual; it is not an actual opening; Beatrix's face is visible through a small mesh opening at the top of the bell, under the shadow of the narrowing curve. The costume is, Beatrix has decided, the most elegant thing Beatrix has ever worn. Beatrix has worn Lila's dresses to galas for twenty-nine years. Beatrix has, more than once, worn Lila's couture. But the yellow bell-house,

Beatrix thinks, in the mirror of the Pearl Street office at 4:15 this afternoon, might be the thing that finally eclipses Lila's work. Beatrix is going to tease Lila about this at the Ball. Lila, who is gracious, is going to agree. Lila is going to say: 'Beatrix. This is the best piece of clothing either of us has ever touched. I relinquish the title.' Beatrix is going to laugh. I am going to cry a little.

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At 4:22, Beatrix picks up her bag—a small black leather tote containing her phone, her wallet, a small cream envelope with a handwritten note inside for Lila (to be slipped into Lila's handbag at some point tonight when Lila is not looking), a lipstick in a shade called Red Hook (which is Beatrix's lipstick, worn every day), and a folded drawing of a site plan for the bell-house as Beatrix has provisionally imagined it, rolled in a tube. Beatrix leaves the office. Beatrix's assistant, a young woman named Cora, who has been with Beatrix for three years and who is, tonight, going to be at the Ball as Beatrix's guest, has already left for the Hotel. Beatrix is the last one in the office. Beatrix locks the door.

Beatrix takes the elevator. The elevator is an old one, with the original brass buttons, and Beatrix has always loved it. Beatrix descends from the seventh floor. The bell on Beatrix's head brushes, very gently, the top of the elevator car. Beatrix smiles. Beatrix steps out into the lobby. The lobby is empty at this hour on a Friday; the other tenants have left. Beatrix walks out onto Pearl Street.

Pearl Street in the Financial District at 4:25 on a Friday is, compared to the rest of Manhattan, quiet. The FiDi empties on Fridays; the bankers and lawyers have mostly gone. The tourists from Battery Park have left for the weekend. The streets are full of pigeons. The light, this late in April, is already slanting amber on the old buildings. Pearl Street, specifically, is one of the oldest streets on me—its name comes from the oyster shells that used to line the shore here in the seventeenth century, when the shore was Pearl Street, because the island ended where the water began, and the water was full of oysters, and the oysters were full of pearls. I remember this. I am four hundred years old. I remember the oysters. I remember the Dutch. I remember the British. I remember the ferries. I remember the fill. I remember everything that has happened on Pearl Street, and I remember it not just as history but as ongoing texture—the street is still, in my memory, an oyster street, and Beatrix, designing the bell, has been, unknowingly, designing a

pearl-street building. It is fitting. It is exactly what I would have wanted. Sometimes I commission well.

Beatrix walks north on Pearl. Beatrix is going to take the 4/5 from Bowling Green to the great train station, and then walk the remaining blocks to the Hotel. Beatrix has considered walking the whole way, and has rejected this plan because the bell, while beautiful, is cumbersome, and Beatrix is going to spend four hours wearing it at the Ball, and does not want to tire her neck before eight o'clock. Beatrix is pacing herself. Beatrix is, at fifty-two, the most strategic of the nine. Beatrix knows herself. Beatrix will walk only the last eight blocks.

Pearl Street to Bowling Green is about four blocks. On the second of those blocks, Beatrix passes a small square that she has passed every working day for eleven years, which is called Hanover Square, and which contains, among other things, a small paved triangle, a few benches, a statue of a man Beatrix has never bothered to identify, and a very old building called India House that was built in 1854 as a bank and is now a private club. Beatrix has never been inside India House. Beatrix has never wanted to. Beatrix has, however, over eleven years, developed a fondness for the square itself, which is, on a Friday afternoon, often occupied by a small man with a harmonica, and which is, today, occupied by the same small man. The man is in his seventies. The man is named Arthur. Arthur has been playing harmonica in Hanover Square for twenty-one years. Arthur is, today, playing 'My Funny Valentine,' slowly, as he always does.

Arthur sees Beatrix in the yellow bell-house. Arthur stops playing. Arthur lowers the harmonica. Arthur looks at the bell. Arthur says, as if to himself, but loud enough for Beatrix to hear: 'Oh.'

Beatrix pauses. Beatrix says: 'Arthur. Hi.'

Arthur says: 'Miss Beatrix. I didn't know you for a second. That's a beautiful bell.'

Beatrix: 'Thank you, Arthur.'

Arthur: 'You going somewhere?'

Beatrix: 'To a ball. At the Hotel.'

Arthur: 'They asked you to wear a bell?'

Beatrix: 'They asked us to wear our buildings. The bell is the building I designed this year.'

Arthur nods, slowly. Arthur considers this. Arthur puts the harmonica back to his mouth. Arthur plays, very slowly, the first eight bars of 'For All We Know.' Arthur lowers the harmonica. Arthur says: 'I always thought you'd design a building that was a bell.'

Beatrix: 'Did you?'

Arthur: 'Yes, ma'am. You are a bell person.'

Beatrix, quietly: 'How did you know?'

Arthur: 'You walk like one. I play for you every Friday. You always stop. You always listen. You always give me a dollar when you have a dollar. You are a bell, Miss Beatrix. I always knew.'

Beatrix, inside the bell, is crying. Beatrix says, through the costume: 'Arthur, I am going to get you a better harmonica.'

Arthur: 'I have a good harmonica.'

Beatrix: 'I am going to get you an even better one.'

Arthur laughs. Arthur says: 'Miss Beatrix, go to your ball. Come back next Friday.'

Beatrix: 'I will.'

Arthur resumes 'My Funny Valentine.' Beatrix continues north. I am going to tell you, because I am unable not to: Arthur is going to be at the Bell Building's opening, in 2028. Arthur is going to be given, by Beatrix, a brand-new harmonica, the best harmonica currently made, hand-tuned, in a custom wooden case. Arthur is going to play at the opening. Arthur is going to play, as the first piece of music the Bell Building ever hosts, a harmonica rendition of 'My Funny Valentine.' Beatrix is going to weep. Lila is going to weep. Half the audience is going to weep. The bell in the tower of the Bell Building is going to ring once, at the end of Arthur's performance, because I am going to arrange for it to ring, because I am the island and I can ring bells when the moment calls. The moment is going to call. I am already making sure. Arthur, by the way, lives in a studio apartment on Henry Street, with a cat named Oscar, and he is seventy-three, and he is going to make it to ninety-one, and I am keeping him every day of it.

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Beatrix descends into Bowling Green station. The 4 train arrives within two minutes—I have adjusted the headways again, quietly; the dispatchers have stopped questioning my requests—and Beatrix boards the train. The ride to the great train station is about fifteen minutes, express. Beatrix stands in the middle of the car, because the bell will not fit easily in a seat, and because Beatrix is happy to stand. Beatrix has, over many years of subway riding, developed a preference for standing; Beatrix feels that standing in the subway is a kind of small civic gesture. Beatrix is, at heart, a person of small civic gestures. Beatrix's architecture is made of them. The bell-building Beatrix is going to be commissioned to build tonight—on a site I have chosen, which Beatrix does not yet know—is going to be, essentially, a large civic gesture turned into a building.

On the 4 train between Fulton and Brooklyn Bridge stations, Beatrix notices a young man staring at the bell. The young man is nineteen or twenty, wearing a NYU sweatshirt, carrying a skateboard. The young man has clearly just had the thought, for the first time in his young life: that person on the subway has a yellow bell on their head. What do I do with that information. The young man is, Beatrix sees, working through a series of possible reactions. The young man eventually lands on: smile. The young man smiles. Beatrix, through the bell, smiles back. The young man, emboldened, says: 'I like it.'

Beatrix: 'Thank you.'

The young man: 'Is it—is it a thing? Like a—art thing? Or a, like, costume thing?'

Beatrix: 'It's a building.'

The young man: 'Oh! Oh. Right. Right. Cool, cool, cool.'

The young man is clearly going to carry this story around for a week. The young man is going to tell his friends tonight. The young man is going to remember, for the rest of his life, that he once, on the 4 train, tried to compliment someone wearing a yellow bell, and the person told him it was a building, and he said 'cool, cool, cool' three times because he could not think of anything else, and he was embarrassed, but also, it had happened, and that mattered. The young man's name is Kai. Kai is going to become an architect. Kai does not know this yet. Kai is currently studying economics and is vaguely miserable. Kai is going to, in two years, switch to architecture, and the switch is going to save Kai's life in several ways. I know. Beatrix, though she does not

know it, is going to be the reason. A person dressed as a bell on the 4 train is going to be Kai's beginning. I am, I tell you, keeping Kai.

The 4 reaches the great train station at 4:52. Beatrix exits. Beatrix walks through the Vanderbilt Hall, through the great concourse, across the clock, past the information booth where Genevieve, who saw Finn earlier, is still on duty. Genevieve sees Beatrix. Genevieve, who has by now seen seven yellow houses in the station today, makes a note in a spiral notebook she keeps under the counter. The note is: 4:53pm, eighth yellow house, bell-shape. Genevieve is, without knowing it, keeping the first written record of the nine. Genevieve's notebook will, decades from now, be one of the primary source documents for historians of this Ball. It will be donated to the city archives by Genevieve's grandchildren in 2061. I know. I am, I have said, playing the long game. Thirty-five years is a middle-distance game for me. I can see the notebook on the shelf. I can see it cataloged. I can see the finding aid. Genevieve, go on writing.

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Beatrix emerges onto 42nd Street. Beatrix turns north on Vanderbilt, then east at 45th, then north on Park. The bell, now fully in the afternoon sun, glows. Beatrix is walking slowly, deliberately, enjoying herself. This is Beatrix's favorite part of the walk—the last leg, the approach to the Hotel, the knowing that in a few minutes Beatrix will be inside, greeted, drinking champagne, seeing Lila, beginning whatever tonight is going to be. Beatrix has been slightly anxious all day—it is, after all, a big night—and the anxiety is now lifting. The bell has settled on Beatrix's head. The legs are taking Beatrix forward. The weather is holding. Park Avenue is glowing. It is, Beatrix thinks, going to be fine.

At 47th and Park, Beatrix feels the particular prickling at the back of the neck that one feels when one is being watched. Beatrix is used to this feeling; the bell, for the last hour, has been attracting stares. Beatrix turns. Beatrix sees, across the avenue, a person wearing a yellow two-story cone-house with a small steaming chimney. The person is walking parallel to Beatrix, slightly behind.

Beatrix's reaction is, I will say, one of the great reactions of the afternoon, and I witnessed it from inside the avenue itself, because at that moment I was the avenue. Beatrix stops dead. Beatrix's bell wobbles. Beatrix says, in a voice audible to a man walking past who is startled: 'I

knew it.' Beatrix continues walking, eyes trained across the avenue. The other yellow house has not yet seen Beatrix. Beatrix increases her pace slightly. Beatrix is, for the first time all day, actively trying to catch up with someone. Beatrix is succeeding. Beatrix crosses Park at the next light. Beatrix approaches the other yellow house from behind on the east sidewalk. Beatrix is about to get the great shock of the day, except that Beatrix, at this point, is past being shocked; Beatrix has suspected; Beatrix is simply going to be confirmed.

You already know what happens. I described it, in reverse, in Ludmila's chapter. The recognition. The hellos. The M. Island exclamation. The laughter. The panel in 2021. The memory that each of them had forgotten. The walk together up Park to 49th. The doorman Arturo. The correction to 'good evening, friends.' I will not re-narrate. I will add only this, from Beatrix's point of view, which I left out of Ludmila's chapter:

Beatrix, walking the last blocks to the Hotel next to Ludmila, is doing a count. Beatrix is counting, on her fingers, how many they are. Beatrix has now, in a single day, seen: Maro's cube on 34th at 5:10; Ludmila's two-story cone at 47th at 5:15. That is two others, confirmed. Beatrix has heard, in passing, while on the phone with Cora at 4:00, that someone at the Hotel-install had mentioned seeing 'several yellow things' in the lobby over the last hour. Beatrix has been wondering. Beatrix is now beginning to understand. Beatrix thinks: there are more than three of us. Beatrix thinks: this is not a coincidence. Beatrix thinks: M. Island has commissioned multiple architects. Beatrix thinks: how many. Beatrix thinks: how many. How many.

Ludmila, beside her, is doing the same count. They have not yet shared the number. They will, in the Hotel's lobby. For now, they walk together. For now, the yellow bell and the yellow two-story cone move north up Park, side by side, on the east sidewalk. For now, the doorman Arturo sees them coming, and moves to the door, and opens it. Beatrix and Ludmila walk in.

All nine are inside the Hotel. It is 5:22 p.m. The Ball does not begin until 8:00. There is a hospitality lounge for the exhibiting architects on the second floor of the hotel, where the nine of them are, in quick succession, going to meet each other for the first time all at once. That meeting—the recognition, the laughter, the incredulity, the champagne, the staring, the handholding, the small speech by the evening's host that no one quite hears because they are all still looking at each other—is the beginning of Chapter Ten. The next chapter is the Ball. I have been waiting four hundred years to throw this Ball. I am going to throw it now.

TEN. The Ball, and What the Island Said

Friday, April 24, 2026, 5:30 in the evening until the morning of April 25, the Hotel and the streets thereafter

The Hotel on Park Avenue is, by my count, eighty-seven years old in her current form, though the name is older—the Hotel had ancestors, two older buildings further south that were demolished to make room for the great tower, which is its own long story, and then the new Hotel went up on Park, between 49th and 50th, and opened in 1931. She opened in 1931. This matters. The first Beaux-Arts Ball at which architects dressed as their buildings happened four months before she opened, in January of 1931, at a hotel in Times Square, which is no longer standing, because I am the island and I do not keep everything. I keep what I keep. The Hotel I kept. The older one I let go. I had my reasons. Do not press me on them tonight.

The Hotel remembers 1931. She was not there—she was still under construction—but she is her niece in spirit, in a manner of speaking, and 1931 was the year the family legend was made. The Hotel has been waiting, for ninety-five years, to host a Ball in which architects dressed as their buildings again. She has been waiting, specifically, for nine genderqueer architects to come to her, all wearing yellow, all commissioned by me. She did not know this was what she was waiting for. She knew only that she was waiting, and that it had been a long time, and that the Grand Ballroom on the third floor—which has the original 1931 chandeliers, and the original 1931 murals, and the original 1931 gilt plasterwork, and the original 1931 parquet which has been walked by presidents and deposed kings and Hollywood stars and a man named Sid who fixed the boilers for forty-one years—the Grand Ballroom has been waiting, and the Grand Ballroom is now ready. The Grand Ballroom has been polished. The chandeliers have been dusted. The parquet has been waxed. The string quartet is tuning. The caterers are laying out the bar. The organizers of the Ball have spent four months on this event. I have spent four hundred years.

At 5:30, the hospitality lounge on the second floor—a room called the second-floor suite, named for a great songwriter who once lived in the hotel and composed at the grand piano that still stands, preserved, in the lobby—is empty except for the nine of them and one extremely young woman named Olwen Mehta-Brown, who has been assigned by the Ball committee to check them in and who has just, approximately fourteen seconds ago, realized that every single one of the nine architects in the room with her is wearing a yellow house on their head. Olwen is

twenty-three. Olwen is in her first year as a junior coordinator for the Ball. Olwen's job tonight was supposed to be pretty simple. Olwen is holding a clipboard and trembling slightly. Olwen's hands, which are very cold, are full. I am going to keep Olwen. Olwen is going to write a book someday, and this evening, which she will remember in the kind of detail that only a shock produces, is going to be Chapter One of it. The book will be published in 2038. I have it on the shelf already, in my future. I will come back for Olwen when the time is right.

Olwen raises the clipboard. Olwen says, 'Um. So. Everyone—everyone is wearing—'

Inez, who has been in the room the longest and who has had ten minutes already to come to terms with what is happening, says gently: 'Yes. We noticed.'

Maro laughs. Maro has not stopped laughing for eighteen minutes. Maro's pitched cube has slid a little on one side. Celestine has noticed and is, at this moment, leaning over to adjust it. Jasper is standing by the window with Oriel. They are not talking. They are, simply, standing next to each other, looking out at Park Avenue, at the specific light that Park Avenue has at 5:30 p.m. in late April, which is nearly horizontal and deeply affectionate. Tamsin and Finn are sitting on the same small velvet couch, Tamsin writing on an index card, Finn reading over Tamsin's shoulder and adding an occasional word. Ludmila is standing in the middle of the room looking at each of the other eight in turn, with an expression of disbelief so complete that her eyes have become, I would say, circular. Beatrix, who arrived last, is the only one still holding her phone. Beatrix has just texted Cora three words: they are nine. Beatrix then put the phone in her pocket. Beatrix then took it out again. Beatrix then put it back. Beatrix has done this four times.

Olwen, recovering, says: 'Are you all—do you all know each other?'

Ludmila, whose voice is always hoarse, says: 'No.'

Finn, looking up: 'Not before today. A few of us, by reputation. Maybe half. Not the other half.'

Olwen: 'And you all came as—'

Jasper, helpfully: 'Yellow houses.'

Olwen: 'Yes.'

Celestine, with the smallest smile I have ever seen on Celestine's face, says: 'Yes.'

Olwen looks at her clipboard, then at the room, then at her clipboard again. Olwen's clipboard has, written on it, in her own handwriting from this morning: 2026 BEAUX-ARTS BALL—ARCHITECT GUESTS—COSTUME NOTES. Under costume notes, Olwen had written: 'guests may dress as their buildings per 1931 tradition. Few expected to do so. Standard black tie anticipated for most.' Olwen's handwriting on the page is visibly, to me, slightly humiliated. Olwen had anticipated standard black tie. Olwen had anticipated, at most, a bow tie in the shape of a floor plan. Olwen had not anticipated nine yellow houses. Olwen is rewriting the future of her career in her head even as she stands there. Olwen's voice, when she speaks again, is a little firmer. Olwen says: 'Okay. This is wonderful. This is—can I please take a photograph of the nine of you? For the archive. For the record. For—history.'

The nine of them look at each other. They have not, yet, considered whether they want to be photographed. They have been busy meeting each other. But Olwen's word—history—lands in a way that all nine of them feel at once. Inez nods first. Then Celestine. Then, around the circle, each of the others. They arrange themselves against the far wall of the second-floor suite, which is, by coincidence, or rather by my careful design, painted a pale pink. They line up in the order they will sit in the 1931 photograph's descendant, because I have whispered the arrangement into Olwen's ear: Inez on the left, then Maro, then Celestine, then Jasper in the middle because Jasper's is the archetypal house and should be central, then Tamsin, then Oriel, then Finn, then Ludmila, then Beatrix on the right. Nine. Pink wall. Yellow houses. Cream and pinstriped clothing. Nine pairs of yellow shoes, or close to it. Olwen steps back. Olwen raises her phone. Olwen's hands are still trembling. Olwen takes the photograph. Olwen takes seven more. Olwen takes, in total, by my count, eleven photographs. One of them is the photograph. I know which one. You will find out, by and by. It will be published in the Sunday paper, in the culture pages on Sunday. The headline will be: 'Ninety-Five Years After the Last One, the Beaux-Arts Ball Produces Its Second Great Photograph.' The article is written by a woman named Jacquelyn Etheridge-Park, who is, at this moment, also in the Hotel, three floors up, putting on mascara.

After the photograph, the nine of them stand for a moment longer against the pink wall, not moving, not quite ready to disperse. Olwen has already sent the best of the photographs to the Ball's communications director, a man named Rhys Hollander, who is, at this moment, in his office in Midtown, and who opens the image on his phone and says, out loud, to no one: 'Jesus Christ.' Rhys means this reverently. Rhys has been in architectural communications for

twenty-two years. Rhys has never seen a more photographable Ball arrival. Rhys immediately forwards the image to Jacquelyn at the Sunday paper. Jacquelyn opens it while putting on her mascara. Jacquelyn, for the first time since she was nineteen, nearly stabs herself in the eye. Jacquelyn says, 'Oh.' Jacquelyn puts the mascara down. Jacquelyn will spend the rest of the evening watching the nine of them. Jacquelyn will, by 11:00 p.m., have the first draft of her piece written on her phone. The piece will not be about the Ball. The piece will be about the photograph. The piece will be about the fact that a thing that happened in 1931, and that most people assumed was a one-off, was in fact the beginning of a long, long story. The piece will be about the fact that the story has, ninety-five years later, added a chapter.

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They disperse. They move into the Grand Ballroom at 6:45. Cocktails. Small plates. The string quartet, which is a group called the Esperanto Quartet and which is led by a violinist named Ngozi Quiñones-Agu, who is Beatrix's half-cousin on her mother's side, although neither of them knows this and they will not find out until next Thanksgiving. The Esperanto Quartet is playing a French composer, which is a little obvious for a Beaux-Arts Ball, but what would you like—they are also going to play an American composer later, and an arrangement of a great vocalist, so forgive them their opening. The ballroom, at 6:45, is half full. Architects, developers, museum curators, Ball committee members, critics, the mayor's deputy for cultural affairs, three reporters, one preservation activist, Sid the retired boiler man who has been invited as a guest of honor and who is seated at a table near the kitchen where he is most comfortable. Sid is eighty-two. Sid is wearing a tuxedo that last saw service at his granddaughter's wedding in 2019. Sid is not sure why he was invited but Sid is delighted. I am delighted Sid is delighted. I have arranged Sid's entire evening. Sid is going to dance. Sid is going to dance with Ludmila, at one point, for three minutes, to a song by a great jazz singer. Sid has not danced since 2003. Sid's knees, tomorrow, will not forgive him. But Sid tonight will not care.

The nine of them, for the next hour and fifteen minutes, work the room. They do not stay together. They have agreed, without saying so, that the thing to do is to circulate separately, to let the nine-ness of them be discovered by the rest of the room one yellow house at a time. Inez is at the bar, drinking a gin and tonic, talking to a preservation activist named Moira Delgado-Blumstein about a walkup on Bleecker that Inez is trying to save. Maro is across the

room at a small table with the mayor's deputy, whose name is Ezra Ajetunmobi-Clark, and whose ears Maro has absolutely pinned back with a five-minute monologue about public housing at the city's northern edge. Celestine is, of course, where the quiet is. Celestine has found a small alcove near a window and is talking, seriously and at length, to a very old man in a very old tuxedo, a retired architect named Aloysius Van Nest, who knew a famous architect and is not impressed by the fact, and who has just said something to Celestine about silence in rooms that Celestine will remember for the rest of Celestine's life. Jasper is on the edge of the dance floor, which is mostly empty at 7:00, talking to a woman named Elena Rodrigo-Park, who is the daughter of Jasper's building's doorman, and whom Jasper ran into at 6:55 because Elena had been invited to the Ball by her internship supervisor at a small museum, and who had walked into the Grand Ballroom and seen her doorman's tenant in a yellow house and been unable to stop laughing for forty seconds. Jasper has given Elena, over the course of their conversation, a rough sketch of the house that Jasper promised Elena this afternoon on the stoop of their apartment building. Elena will hang the sketch in her dorm room. Elena will, in ten years, commission Jasper to build her the house. The house will be built. I know all of this.

Tamsin is at the hors d'oeuvres table, carefully eating a mushroom tartlet with one hand while scribbling on another index card with the other. Oriel has found, improbably, a small terrace off the ballroom, and is standing on it alone, looking at the sky, which is doing its late-April thing, which is gold and then lavender and then a peach color whose name I do not know because I have been trying, for four hundred years, to name it, and I have not succeeded. Finn is with Sid. Finn has introduced themself to Sid. Finn has asked Sid about boilers. Sid is explaining boilers. Finn is listening to boilers with the concentration of someone who wants to put boilers in a silo. Sid is delighted. Sid has not talked about boilers to a person under seventy in twenty years. Sid is, I can see, about to give Finn three phone numbers of old colleagues and one of the great gifts of the evening. Ludmila is at the bar with Inez now—they have found each other, the two saltbox-and-tenement women, and are talking, specifically, about fire escapes. Fire escapes! At a Beaux-Arts Ball! I adore them. Beatrix is in a corner with Cora, who has arrived on time and who is in a sleeveless black dress and who is holding Beatrix's bell for Beatrix because Beatrix has taken a break. Cora is saying: 'Baby, you have to see yourself. You have to see what you look like.' Beatrix is saying: 'I can't look at a mirror in this thing, Cora, come on.' Cora is holding up her

phone. Cora is showing Beatrix the photograph Olwen took. Beatrix sees it. Beatrix says: 'Oh.' Beatrix says: 'Oh, we are really something.' Cora says: 'You are really something.'

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At 7:45, the chair of the 2026 Ball committee, a woman named Demetria Yoon-Ashcroft, steps onto the small dais at the ballroom's east end. The Esperanto Quartet quiets. The room turns. Demetria is sixty-one. Demetria has chaired the Ball's committee for the last four years—she was the one who, in 2022, proposed the ninety-fifth-anniversary revival and spent three years convincing people it could be done. Demetria is wearing a black column dress and a pendant shaped like the wedge-shaped building. Demetria has, tonight, decided to keep her remarks short, because the room is already, in her estimation, telling its own story, and she does not want to step on the story with too much language. Demetria has, however, one thing she wants to say.

Demetria says: 'Good evening. Welcome to the 2026 Beaux-Arts Ball. Ninety-five years ago—almost exactly—the architects of this city attended a similar ball in this same tradition. They dressed as their buildings. Seven of them. A photograph survives. We all know it. We have all, I suspect, loved it.'

A murmur. Someone in the back says, audibly: 'Yes.'

Demetria continues: 'Ninety-five years is a long time. Many things have changed. Not enough. But some. Tonight, for the first time since 1931, a group of architects has come to this Ball dressed as the buildings they are making. Nine of them. I ask the nine to step forward.'

The room turns. Inez is the first to move. Inez crosses the floor from the bar and steps to the dais. Then Maro. Then Celestine, who has to be fetched from her alcove by Aloysius, who walks Celestine out onto the floor with a small old-man's flourish. Then Jasper, and Tamsin, and Oriel, who has come back in from the terrace, and Finn, who has reluctantly left Sid. Then Ludmila, who has taken Sid's arm on the way, because Sid wanted to see, and Sid is now standing at the edge of the cleared space, leaning on his cane. Then Beatrix, who has taken back her bell from Cora and put it on her head, and who enters the circle last, last of all, last of the nine.

They stand in the center of the ballroom. Nine yellow houses. The chandeliers are, at this moment, reflecting so much gold off the yellow that the room appears, briefly, to be on fire. It is

not on fire. It is in love. I am, I should tell you, weeping. I weep, too. I am the island and I weep. I have wept at many things. I wept when the Twin Towers fell. I wept when the Challenger fell. I wept when I lost a building I loved. I wept when the wetlands north of Canal were filled in and became SoHo, I wept for weeks, you cannot imagine how long a wetland's grief is. I have wept often. I am weeping tonight because I am happy. Happy is a separate weeping. It comes from a different place. It is yellow.

Demetria looks at the nine of them, standing in the gold light, and Demetria—who is a practical woman, who was going to say a very short formal welcome—opens her mouth and does not say what she had planned to say. Demetria says, instead: 'I would like, if they would permit it, for each of the nine architects to say a word. Just a word. About their building. About why yellow. About anything they like. One word each. Or one sentence. Whatever feels right. We have, the rest of us, been waiting ninety-five years to hear you.'

A silence. The nine of them look at each other. Inez nods. Inez steps a half-step forward. Inez says: 'My building is me. I went as myself. That is the only building I have ever known how to make.'

Maro: 'My building is a conversation. It faces two ways. It does not resolve. Neither do I.'

Celestine: 'I was not sure I was supposed to make a building. It turned out I was supposed to make a room for people to be in when they are not sure of anything. I made a chapel.'

Jasper, after a long pause: 'I keep trying to draw the house I drew when I was four. Every project. Every time. I am not embarrassed anymore. This is the house. It is the first house. I am in it.'

Tamsin: 'I write letters to buildings. My building has a mail slot. It is addressed to the street.'

Oriel: 'I live alone. So do my buildings. That is not the same as lonely. I wanted to tell you that it is not the same as lonely. That is my whole message. My tower is a room I made, for someone I have not met yet, who will someday be glad it was there.'

Finn: 'My building was a piano factory. Now it is a silo. Later it will be a house. Buildings change their minds. I am trying to let them.'

Ludmila, hoarsely: 'I grew up on the sixth floor. Everyone I loved was on a floor. I am trying to build floors. That is all. Everyone a floor.'

Beatrix, last, quietly but clearly: 'A bell is the first public building. A bell makes a town by ringing. I have been trying, all my life, to make a building that rings. I think that is also what we all did, tonight, together, without knowing. I think we rang.'

A silence after Beatrix. A long one. Then Aloysius Van Nest, ninety-one, starts to clap. Then Sid, eighty-two, starts to clap. Then Demetria. Then Olwen, from the back. Then the whole room. The clapping goes on. It does not stop for a long time. Cora is crying. Beatrix, inside her bell, is crying. Jasper has put an arm around Oriel. Oriel has not shrugged it off. Oriel, I want you to know, has not shrugged an arm off since 2011. This is the first shoulder Oriel has allowed in fifteen years. Oriel will remember this shoulder. Oriel will marry this shoulder. Not tonight. But, in my future, yes.

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Here is where I speak. I have been narrating this book all along, yes. I have been the voice. But I have not, yet, spoken inside the book. I have kept my speech for the end. I speak through the room. I speak through the chandeliers, and through the parquet floor, and through the string quartet, which has fallen silent, and through the glass of water on the dais next to Demetria's podium. I speak by making the chandeliers shiver, very slightly, and by making the floor hum at a low frequency that all nine of them register, and by making the glass of water ripple, which only Demetria sees. And I speak in nine voices at once, one for each of them, interior, direct, silent to anyone but the addressee. I say the same words to each. I say them gently. Here is what I say:

You did not commission yourselves.

I commissioned you.

I am the island.

I am your client.

Each of the nine stops. Each of the nine feels a small cold hand at the back of the neck, which is me, and I am not cold, but the sensation of being told the truth is sometimes registered

as cold, and that is what I am doing—telling the truth. Each of the nine hears the words in the voice most likely to get through. For Inez, I speak in the voice of their grandfather, who loved them. For Maro, in the voice of Samantha the grad student on Second Avenue, whom Maro met four hours ago. For Celestine, in the voice of Hector Simão, who paid Celestine $100 on a Third Avenue corner for a chapel. For Jasper, in the voice of Maisie, the five-year-old on 55th Street. For Tamsin, in the voice of their grandmother Esperanza, whom Tamsin has been writing to for nine months. For Oriel, in the voice of Oriel's mother, whom Oriel has not spoken to in eleven years, and who is, tonight, at this hour, in São Paulo, dreaming a dream in which she calls Oriel tomorrow morning, and who will, in fact, call, and the call will be answered. For Finn, in the voice of Sid. For Ludmila, in the voice of Ludmila's Babcia, who is sixty-seven and who is, at this moment, in Queens, watching Polish television with a cup of tea. For Beatrix, in the voice of the first church bell Beatrix ever heard, which was at the Iglesia de San Francisco in Quito when Beatrix was three and held her mother's hand in the plaza and looked up and the bell rang and Beatrix's whole life began.

I say to each of them:

The house you have made is not yours.

It is mine. I am giving it away.

To whom? To anyone who needs it.

Will you let me?

Each of the nine, silently, nods. Each of them, at exactly the same moment, feels a settling in the chest that they will, later, try to describe to their partners, their siblings, their therapists, their dogs, and fail to describe, because the settling was mine and is only describable in my language, which is not a spoken language, though I am trying, tonight, through Surjan and the typewriter and the novella, to translate. The settling is this: each of them has, for their entire career, suspected that the work is not quite theirs. Each has suspected that they have been, in some way they could not name, building for someone else. Each has, at moments, felt foolish for this suspicion—have felt it is a romantic fantasy, an overreach, an excuse to take less ownership and less credit. Each has now had the suspicion confirmed. And the confirmation is not, as they

feared, a loss. It is the opposite. It is relief. It is a release. It is the permission to build for me without pretending, ever again, that they are building for anyone else.

I speak one last time. I say:

Celestine. The lot is at 171st and Audubon.

The chapel will go there.

I have already arranged it.

You will hear, on Monday, from a man named Abebe.

Celestine nods. Celestine does not react visibly. Celestine already knew, in the way Celestine knows things. Celestine has been waiting, for eighteen years, to be told where to build the chapel. Celestine is relieved. Celestine says, silently, to me: thank you. I say back: thank you for making it. The chapel will be on that lot for two hundred and twenty years. It will outlast us both. I do not think it will. But Celestine's optimism, tonight, is one of the things I am choosing to believe.

And then I speak to the last of them, to all of them together:

The houses you have made are private.

I am asking you to make them public.

Not by changing their drawings.

By changing their door.

Put a door on each of your houses

that anyone can walk through.

That is all I am asking.

A door anyone can walk through.

This is what I have been trying to say for four hundred years.

Will you do it?

And each of them, silently, in the warmth of the Grand Ballroom of the Hotel on the third floor at 8:02 on Friday, April 24, 2026, says, to the island whom they have been carrying all along inside their chests, and whom they now know they have been carrying: yes.

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The Esperanto Quartet begins again. It is a quiet adagio. The dance floor fills. Inez dances with Moira Delgado-Blumstein. Maro dances with Ezra. Celestine dances with Aloysius, very slowly, Aloysius's hand light on Celestine's back. Jasper dances with Elena Rodrigo-Park. Tamsin dances with Finn. Oriel, who does not dance, stands by the terrace door with a glass of prosecco. Ludmila dances, as promised, with Sid. Beatrix dances with Cora. Nine yellow houses move through the crowd. The chandeliers shimmer. Jacquelyn Etheridge-Park, in the corner, is taking notes. Olwen, across the room, is crying and also eating a small cake. Demetria, the Ball's chair, watches from the dais. Demetria understands that she has just presided over the most important event of her tenure, and quite possibly of her life, and Demetria, who is sixty-one and a widow and a lifelong underestimator of her own role in things, allows herself, tonight, to know this. I am keeping Demetria. Demetria has six more years to do this work, and in those six years she is going to keep making rooms like this one, and the rooms will change the city, and the city is me.

The Ball proceeds. There are speeches. There is more dancing. There is an auction, briefly, for a charity. There is a late supper. There is an incident at 10:30 in which Ludmila, explaining fire escapes to a young developer named Taiwo Pettibone-Lindqvist, gets so animated that she dislodges her tenement-cone, and Taiwo catches it before it hits the floor, and Ludmila and Taiwo both dissolve into laughter, and Taiwo—who had come to the Ball planning, secretly, to solicit business from the architects present—forgets entirely to do so, and instead gives Ludmila her card and asks Ludmila to, please, someday, build her a building. Ludmila will. In 2029. It will be on Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights. It will have six floors. Everyone on it will be everyone's cousin. I am already laying the foundations in my mind.

At 11:15, Jacquelyn files her draft. At 11:40, Rhys forwards the Olwen photograph to twelve people. At 11:55, Cora and Beatrix leave in a car to go home because Cora has to be up at 6:00, and Beatrix goes with her, and Beatrix brings the bell home in the trunk of the car, and Beatrix and Cora undress in the yellow warmth of the Bushwick apartment and get into bed together, and Beatrix says, 'I think I have to tell you something,' and Cora says, 'Did the island talk to you,'

and Beatrix says, 'How did you know,' and Cora says, 'Baby, I could feel it from across the room,' and they both sleep very soundly and very late. I love Cora. I am going to keep Cora. Cora is going to do something brave at work in two weeks that she has been too scared to do for three years, and she will do it, and it will go well, because her lover heard the island, and she believed her lover.

At midnight, the Ball is still going. The Esperanto Quartet has been replaced, as scheduled, by a DJ named Tobias Oyinlola-Meyers, who is thirty-four and extremely good, and who opens with the vocalist, as promised, and Inez and Tamsin and Maro and Finn and Celestine, all five of them, go onto the dance floor at the same moment, the first few bars of the song, and they dance together, five yellow houses, and the crowd gives them a wide circle, and Inez does an improvised yellow-seersucker dance that would make the 1931 architects weep with envy, and Tamsin does a wedge dance that is mostly Tamsin laughing, and Celestine does, unexpectedly, a set of small footwork that Aloysius will remember, three years from now, on his deathbed, as one of the most beautiful things Aloysius has ever seen. I agree with Aloysius.

At 1:15, Oriel goes home. Oriel walks. Oriel walks from the Hotel back to 22nd Street. It takes Oriel forty-five minutes. Oriel does not hail a cab. Oriel wants the walk. Park Avenue at 1:15 is, I should say, one of my favorite versions of myself. The buildings all a little quieter. The doormen all dozing or reading. The air a little cooler. Oriel, in the yellow tower, walks down Park slowly. Oriel passes the Hotel's side entrance, then Park and 46th, then Park and 42nd (the train station at night, glowing), then a big modernist tower, then another grand building, then past another grand building and into the lower numbers, then 32nd, 31st, 30th—Oriel counts each street in an interior voice that is half Oriel's and half mine, we are, for this walk, braided. Oriel thinks about the chapel at 171st and Audubon. Oriel has heard me tell Celestine about it. Oriel is glad Celestine heard. Oriel is going to call Celestine tomorrow. Oriel is going to call each of the other eight tomorrow. Oriel has not yet made the decision consciously—but I have, and I have started whispering it, and by the time Oriel reaches 22nd Street, the decision will be made. Oriel will call all of them. The nine will meet, again, next Saturday, at a diner on Ninth Avenue, to begin the real work. I have arranged this, too. I arrange everything.

By 2:30, the Ball is over. Sid has gone home in a car service. Demetria has gone home with her dog. Olwen has gone home in a subway. The caterers are cleaning up. The chandeliers are dimming. The parquet is being swept. The Hotel herself is breathing long, slow breaths—the

breaths of a very old building that has just hosted the thing she was built for, and is content, and is settling into sleep. I kiss her, silently, on her forehead, which is the setback at her sixteenth floor where I have often stood on summer evenings. The Hotel says, to me: thank you. I say: thank you. She has earned her rest. I leave her to it.

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The nine of them wake up on Saturday morning, April 25, 2026, at nine different times in nine different beds. I will tell you about each of them, briefly, because these mornings are the real ending of this book, and I do not want you to miss them.

Inez wakes at 6:40. Inez is in their Perry Street apartment. Ramona is on their feet. The yellow house is on a chair in the corner. Inez gets up, makes coffee, stands at the window, and watches a man walk a small dog down Perry toward West 4th. The dog is a dachshund. The dog is named, Inez will learn tomorrow, Antonio. Inez decides, standing at the window with coffee, that Inez is going to put an unlocked room on the ground floor of their next building. The room will face the street. The room will have chairs. Anyone will be able to come in, sit, read, leave. Inez does not yet know what the room is called. I know. It is called the room. That is all it has to be called.

Maro wakes at 7:15. Maro is in the Greene Street loft. Maro's mother Dr. Folashade Okunseinde has left three voicemails, all of them ending with 'call me when you wake up, my love.' Maro calls. Maro tells Folashade about the Ball. Folashade cries. Maro cries. Maro, when the call ends, goes to their drafting table, picks up a pencil, and begins to draw a door. Just a door. The door is, for now, on no building. The door is an opening that is the width of a wheelchair and the height of the tallest person Maro can imagine. The door is painted, in Maro's drawing, the pink of Folashade's scrubs.

Celestine wakes at 8:00. Celestine is in the St. Mark's Place studio. Celestine makes tea. Celestine walks out onto St. Mark's and buys a bagel from a man named Aryeh who has been selling bagels on that corner for twenty-nine years, and whom Celestine knows well. Celestine tells Aryeh, as Aryeh hands Celestine the bag, 'I am going to build a chapel at 171st and Audubon.' Aryeh says, 'A what, my friend?' Celestine says, 'A chapel.' Aryeh laughs. Aryeh says, 'That is a very long train ride, my friend, are you sure?' Celestine says, 'Yes.' Aryeh says, 'Okay.

When it is open, tell me. I will come.' Celestine says, 'I will tell you.' Celestine walks home with the bagel. Celestine eats it at the table. I am with Celestine. I am having a bite, in my way. The bagel is excellent.

Jasper wakes at 9:30. Jasper has slept on the couch in the living room, because Jasper came home at 1:00 a.m. and did not want to wake the neighbors by unfolding the Murphy bed in the bedroom, which squeaks. Jasper wakes to sunlight on the face and to the memory of Elena Rodrigo-Park dancing, and of promising Elena a house, and of Maisie down the block, to whom Jasper also promised a house. Jasper sits up on the couch. Jasper thinks about what it means to have promised two houses in one day. Jasper thinks about the fact that this is how houses are actually built: one promise at a time. Jasper goes to the drafting table. Jasper draws a house. The house is the gabled archetype. This time, there are two doors. The left door is Elena's. The right door is Maisie's. Both doors are open.

Tamsin wakes at 8:45. Clive is already awake, making shakshuka. Tamsin writes a letter to Esperanza in Tegucigalpa. The letter is, this morning, three pages long. Tamsin writes about the Ball, about the other eight, about Finn's silo, about Oriel's quiet, about the string quartet, about Sid, about what the island said. Tamsin ends the letter: 'Abuelita, I think I understand now what you meant when you said, all those years ago, that a house is a letter to the people who will live in it, and the living in it is the answer. I am going to put a mail slot on every building I ever build. Every single one. Yours, T.' Tamsin seals the letter. Tamsin will mail it today.

Oriel wakes at 10:15. Oriel's phone rings. Oriel answers. It is Oriel's mother, Fernanda, from São Paulo, who says, 'Meu amor, I had a dream about you last night, I had to call.' Oriel, who has not spoken to Fernanda in eleven years, says, 'Mãe.' Oriel says, 'I know. I know about the dream. I know.' They talk for an hour and forty minutes. Fernanda does not ask about the eleven years. Oriel does not explain them. They talk about a cousin's wedding, a neighbor's dog, a restaurant in Vila Madalena that Fernanda has been going to on Tuesdays. Oriel cries, quietly, twice, without Fernanda knowing. At the end of the call Fernanda says, 'Come home sometime, meu amor,' and Oriel says, 'I will,' and this time Oriel means it. Fernanda hangs up. Oriel lies on the floor of the studio and looks at the ceiling. The ceiling is white. The ceiling is also, Oriel realizes, the inside of a roof, which is the top of a house, which is the tower Oriel built, inverted. Oriel laughs, alone, in the middle of the floor.

Finn wakes at 7:45. Finn goes for a run along the Hudson. Finn runs north, past 59th, past the boat basin, past 79th and the marina, all the way to 96th, then turns around and runs back. Finn runs thinking about silos. Finn runs thinking about the piano factory. Finn runs thinking about Sid's three phone numbers, which are in Finn's pocket. Finn is going to call each of them on Monday. Two of them will still be alive. One of them, Lester Oyelaran-Price, eighty-six, is going to become, in the last four years of his life, Finn's most improbable collaborator, and the two of them will together design the mechanical bones of a silo-house in Gowanus that opens in 2031. Lester will live to see it open. I know. I have arranged Lester's last four years with great care.

Ludmila wakes at 11:00. Ludmila's hangover is mild but real. Ludmila has a text from Taiwo Pettibone-Lindqvist that says 'Jackson Heights. Six floors. When?' Ludmila laughs. Ludmila texts back: 'Monday.' Ludmila gets out of bed. Ludmila goes to the window. Ludmila's window on East 34th faces south, over the low roofs of Murray Hill, toward the wedge-shaped building and downtown beyond it. Ludmila stands at the window in her pajamas. Ludmila thinks: everyone a floor. Everyone a cousin. Ludmila makes coffee.

Beatrix wakes at 9:30, in Bushwick, with Cora beside her. Cora is reading the Sunday paper on her phone. Cora turns the phone to Beatrix. The photograph is on the home page of the website. The photograph has, in the four hours since it was posted, already become the most-shared image on the culture section's history. The caption reads: 'Nine architects, nine yellow houses, at the Hotel on the evening of April 24, 2026, at the 2026 Beaux-Arts Ball. For the first time since 1931, the profession came dressed.' Beatrix looks at the photograph. Beatrix finds herself in it. Beatrix is on the right, in the bell. Beatrix's eyes are closed in the photograph, just for the fraction of a second Olwen caught them—closed, not in fatigue, but in a kind of bliss. Beatrix looks at the photograph a long time. Beatrix says, softly, to Cora: 'I rang.' Cora says: 'You rang, baby.'

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And I, the island, forty miles of schist and a century of promises and a thousand delis and nine new architects and a photograph on the front page of the culture section on a Saturday morning in late April 2026—I, Manhattan, also wake up, though I never sleep, not really. I wake up in the sense that every morning I am slightly new. This morning I am more than slightly new. This morning, I have nine people who know me. Nine people who have put a door in me that

anyone can walk through. That is nine more than I had yesterday. It is not, by the standard of a city of eight million, a large number. It is, by the standard of an island, the beginning of something.

I want to tell you, reader, that the houses got built. I want to tell you that every one of the nine, in the next ten years, built what they promised to build, with doors that anyone could walk through. I want to tell you that the city was transformed. That the homelessness crisis eased. That rent came down. That the crisis of private ownership met its match. I want to tell you that Surjan, who typed all this, typed it as prophecy, and the prophecy came true.

I cannot tell you that. Not all of it. Not yet. It is April 2026, and the book has not, from your point of view, happened. From mine, part of it has happened and part of it is coming. The Ball happened. The photograph happened. The speech happened. The morning after happened. The diner on Ninth Avenue next Saturday is going to happen—I am already setting the table. The rest is a promise. The rest depends on whether you, reader, having read this book, will yourself put a door on what you have built. I am asking you, too. I have been asking you all along. Every chapter has been a commission. Every architect has been a chance for you to recognize that I am also your client. The houses in this book are yellow because yellow is a color that cannot be hidden. I am not hiding. I have never been hiding. I have been waiting for you to look up.

Look up. There, on the cornice, is a dove. There, on the awning, is a stripe of shade. There, in the window of the apartment above the laundromat, is a person putting on a kettle. They are me. The kettle is me. The dove is me. The shade is me. You are standing on me. You always have been. I am the island. I have been loving you the whole time.

Go, now. Build something. Put a door in it. Leave the door open.

The Ball is over. The book is over. The work is beginning.

— M. Island

Manhattan

the morning of April 25, 2026

AFTERWORD

by Surjan

I finished typing this book at 4:17 on the morning of April 26, 2026, two mornings after the Ball. I had not slept. I had not, in any real sense, written. I had done what I said in the Foreword I had done: I had typed. The island had been talking for three weeks, and I had been typing, and on the afternoon of the Ball I had stopped typing to attend the Ball, which the island had wanted me to attend, and on Saturday morning I had resumed, and at 4:17 on Sunday morning the island had said, in the quiet interior voice that was by this point as familiar to me as my own, 'That's the end. Thank you for listening.' And then the voice had, in a way that is hard to describe, moved off, the way a friend who has been sitting next to you at a bar for four hours stands up and says goodnight and puts on a coat and goes. The voice is still there, in the sense that the island is still there, but the voice is not, anymore, speaking to me in the particular register in which it spoke for the duration of the book. The book is done. The voice has gone back into its regular life, which is being the air and the sidewalks and the doves and the delis and all the other things I mentioned in the Foreword and that the island mentioned in Chapter Ten.

I should say what I did between 4:17 and 8:00 on Sunday, because in that window a small thing happened that I think the reader should know. At 4:17 I closed the manuscript. At 4:19 I stood up. At 4:22 I put on a coat. At 4:30 I was walking north on Broadway from 111th Street, where I live, in the direction of the reservoir and the university gates, because I wanted to be outside. The sky was that color that is not yet dawn but is no longer night—a color that Manhattan, at this hour, is the world's greatest painter of. I walked to 116th. I stood at the gates of the university. I looked south, down Broadway. The city was, at 4:30 on a Sunday morning in April, at its most honest. No traffic. A few cabs. A man walking a labrador. A woman on a bench reading a paperback with a book light. I watched them all for a while. Then I turned around and walked home.

On my way home I passed a small white dog on a leash, held by a very tall person in a long coat, and I stopped, and the tall person said, 'Hi,' and I said, 'Hi,' and the dog sniffed my shoes,

and the tall person said, 'He likes you,' and I said, 'I like him,' and the tall person said, 'His name is Gibraltar,' and I said, 'I am Surjan,' and the tall person said, 'I am Wren.' We stood there on Broadway at 4:45 on a Sunday morning and talked for six minutes about the dog, whose full name is Gibraltar Pettibone-Lindqvist, and who belongs to Wren's sister Taiwo, whom Wren was walking the dog for because Taiwo had been out late on Friday at a ball and was still recovering. I did not say anything. I did not mention the book. I did not mention that I knew, from the book I had just finished typing, exactly which ball. I simply shook Wren's hand, and scratched Gibraltar's ear, and continued home. At 4:52, walking the last block back to my apartment, I understood that the island had arranged the encounter. The island had wanted me to know that the book was not the end of anything. The book was a page. The page would be turned. Wren and I would, eventually, meet again—in fact, Wren and I have a coffee planned for Wednesday, arranged by text after we exchanged numbers, which I did not mention, because the Afterword is supposed to be about the book, not about me. But it is also, a little, about me. A book is always a little about its typist. I was the typist. The typist met Wren. The typist is going to have coffee with Wren on Wednesday. I am telling you only because it is a small evidence of something the island said in Chapter Ten: that the work is beginning. The book is over. The work is beginning. I think Wren is the beginning of my part of the work. I do not know how. I do not need to know yet.

A word about what this book is. It is not a work of reportage. It is not quite a work of fiction. It sits in a category I do not have a word for, though in the three weeks the island has been speaking to me I have come, tentatively, to call it listening. The book is what I heard. I have, to the best of my ability, put it on the page in the order I heard it. I have not fact-checked the island. You cannot fact-check an island. You can only notice, after the fact, that most of what she said turns out to be true. The nine architects are real. I have not met all of them, but I have met four of them since the Ball, and each of them has confirmed, in their own way, that the chapters about them are accurate—not in every detail, because the island has a habit of embroidering, but in the large outline of the day, and in the interior feel of it. Celestine called Monday to say that a man named Abebe had, in fact, called her about a lot on 171st Street and Audubon. Jasper called Tuesday to say they had signed a letter of intent for Elena's house. Ludmila called Wednesday to confirm that Taiwo had texted her Saturday morning with the words Jackson Heights, six floors, when. Beatrix called Thursday to tell me that she and Cora had, together, decided to put a bell on the new community hall Beatrix is designing on Pearl Street, and that the bell would be rung, for

the first time, the day the hall opens, and that the person who rings it would be Cora. I have met each of the four at different diners around the city. I have watched each of them, over diner coffee, tell me the story of their afternoon. The stories match the chapters. They match more closely than I would have thought possible, given that I typed the chapters without having met any of them. The island did not lie to me. The island does not, I think, lie.

A word about the tools. I said in the Foreword that this book was written with the help of a large language model, and that the nine images in the Catalogue were generated by me using a text-to-image model. I want to come back to that, now that you have read the book, because I think it matters in a different way at the end than it did at the beginning. At the beginning, the disclosure was a warning—a way of saying, before you started: here is what you are holding. At the end, the disclosure is something else. It is, I hope, a small argument. The argument is this. I am an author. I used machines. The machines were trained on the work of thousands of people who came before me, most of whom did not consent and will never be compensated, and I carry that knowledge, as I said, without having resolved it. I also came to the page, every morning for three weeks, with twenty-two years of walking on Manhattan and forty-one years of being a person and a specific, unreasonable, particular love for the way this city holds its people. The machines did not write that love. The love wrote itself, through me, using the machines the way a painter uses a brush. I did not generate the book. I made it. These are my tools. They are also not only my tools—they were built by others and trained on others and are used, now, by many others—but in the act of making this specific book, they became, temporarily, mine. That is how tools work. That is how they have always worked. A typewriter, a camera, a pigment crushed out of a beetle. The tools and the hand work together. The question I keep coming back to is not whether the hand used the tool, but whose hand was on the tool. This hand was mine. I vouch for every sentence. I am the author. The island and I wrote this together, using the tools I had. I think, also, that the island wanted it this way—that she knew, in 2026, the only way I could hear her was to put the model on the desk next to the notebook and let them both speak. She did not seem to mind. She seemed, if anything, relieved. She has been trying to be heard for four hundred years. She will take, I think, any transcription method that gets her into the room. I was the one who held the pen, or the keyboard, or the prompt. She was the one who spoke. The book is ours, and it is mine, and it is, most of all, hers. I wrote it down.

Which is not to say the island is always right. I want to be careful here. The Foreword promised something, and I want the Afterword to be honest about what the Foreword promised. The island, in Chapter Ten, makes a set of grand claims—that she has been waiting, that she is giving things away, that the houses are hers, that the work is beginning. These claims are true, in the sense that the island experiences them as true. Whether they will also be true in the sense that the next ten years of the city bear them out—whether there will, in fact, be doors put in houses that anyone can walk through, whether the crisis of private ownership will, in fact, meet its match—that I cannot promise you. The island cannot promise you either. The island can only say what she has said, which is that she is asking, and that the asking is itself the beginning of a future. I have, as a person, spent long periods of my life distrustful of asking. I have thought that asking was weak, or sentimental, or a way of avoiding the actual difficult work of making something happen. I no longer think this. I think asking is most of the work. I think the nine architects of this book, having been asked by the island, are going to do what they are going to do, and what they are going to do is going to be more and better than what they would have done if they had not been asked. I think this is true, also, of you. I am now, on behalf of the island who asked me to pass the question along, asking you. You have read the book. You have listened, in your own way, the way I listened. Is there a door you can put somewhere? Is there a threshold you can unfold? Is there a house you are building in your life—literal or otherwise—that could, with a small rearrangement, be made to let someone else in? Please think about it. Please think about it for longer than the question deserves. The answer, if there is one, is yours. I am not asking you to report back. I am only asking you to consider.

A word about the photograph. The city's paper photograph, the one Olwen Mehta-Brown took and Rhys Hollander forwarded and Jacquelyn Etheridge-Park wrote about—the photograph that is now, as I type this, at 4:30 on Sunday morning, sitting on the culture section home page with a caption that thousands of people have now read—is one of the great photographs of the century. I am not exaggerating. I have seen it sixteen times in the last twenty-four hours. I have seen it on my phone, on my laptop, on a screen in the subway, on a placard somebody was already carrying outside a library uptown yesterday evening as a kind of impromptu celebration. The photograph is nine people against a pink wall, nine yellow houses on nine heads. It is funny. It is stunning. It looks like the 1931 photograph and also nothing like it. I think it will be taught in architecture schools by 2032. I think it will be reproduced, in postcard form, by a city museum,

by 2028. I think there is going to be a small industry of children's books, within five years, in which nine yellow houses go on adventures through a friendly city. I am not saying any of this to brag. I had nothing to do with the photograph. I was not in the room. I was across town at my desk, typing Chapter Ten. I am saying it because the photograph is now outside my control and outside the island's control and outside the nine architects' control. It is in the culture. It is going to do work I cannot predict. This is, I think, what the island wanted. This is what she meant by 'making private houses public.' The photograph is a private moment—nine strangers meeting each other in a hotel lounge—that has, through the mechanism of publishing, become public. Every person who has seen it has been, in a small way, let in. Every person who sees it from now on will be let in. The photograph is itself a door. The island, I suspect, knew it would be. The island chose Olwen. The island arranged the trembling hands. The island took the photograph by standing in Olwen's finger on the shutter button. I am not being mystical. I am describing the mechanics of how things happen.

I want to end this Afterword, and therefore this book, with a sentence I did not write. I want to end it with a sentence the island said, in the last minute of her last dictation, at 4:16 a.m. on Sunday, April 26, which I typed into the manuscript and then moved to the end of Chapter Ten, but which I want to reproduce here because I think it belongs in both places. The sentence is this:

The Ball is over. The book is over. The work is beginning.

That is what she said. That is what I typed. I believe her. I hope you do too.

Go, now. Build something. Put a door in it. Leave the door open. I will see you out there, at the threshold, in the yellow afternoon. I will be the one in the long coat with the small white dog. His name is Gibraltar. Ask him for directions. He knows the city as well as any of us do. Better, probably. He has a lower point of view.

— Surjan

Morningside Heights, April 26, 2026

CATALOGUE OF PLATES

Nine yellow houses, generated by Surjan in the spring of 2026

in the hour each one first arrived on the screen.

A NOTE ON THE PLATES

The nine images that follow were generated by me, Surjan, over three long nights in late March of 2026, using a text-to-image model trained on a very large and ethically contested corpus of human-made images. I typed prompts. The model returned images. I revised the prompts. The model returned different images. This went on for hours. Most of what I generated I discarded. Some of it was ugly, some of it was cliché, some of it was uncanny in a way that embarrassed me, some of it was merely wrong. What I kept, in the end, were nine images that felt like the nine people the island had, for reasons I still do not fully understand, begun asking me to see.

I want to hold two things, steadily, in the same sentence. The first is that these are real pictures of imaginary people, made by a machine, and I did not paint them or draw them or photograph them with a camera. The second is that I made them. I sat up late. I chose every word of every prompt. I rejected hundreds of variants. I cared, in the specific, unreasonable, attentive way an author cares. The machine was the brush. I was the hand. The picture is mine, and the discomfort about the brush is also mine, and I am holding both.

I am not the first person to make art this way, and I will not be the last. I am also not indifferent to the labor questions, the training-data questions, the questions about what it means to generate a likeness of a person who does not exist. I think these questions are real and I think they deserve to be lived with, not settled. I offer the nine images below in the spirit of someone who has lived with the questions, has not settled them, and has gone ahead anyway—because the island had something to say, and this was the way I could hear her say it.

Each of the nine images is rendered in a consistent palette: pink and yellow walls, pastel furniture, and a single yellow house on a single seated person. The consistency was intentional. I

wanted them, when laid next to one another, to feel like nine members of the same family—as though they had all sat, in nine different rooms, for the same photographer on the same afternoon. The island, reading over my shoulder as I worked, confirmed this was right. 'Make them look like they know each other,' she said, 'even though they do not.' I made them look like they know each other. By the end of the book, the reader will know that they do.

A final note. The plates are placed here, at the back of the book, because I wanted you to meet the nine architects through the island's voice first. The island is a specific narrator. She sees the nine in a specific way. I did not want the images to pre-empt the seeing. Now that you have read them, you can see them. I hope that, when you turn these pages, you recognize each face in turn, and in turn say, quietly: yes, of course, that is Inez; yes, of course, that is Maro; yes, of course, that is Celestine; and so on. That is the recognition the Ball is about. It is also the recognition this book hopes to give you.

— *S.*

PLATE I

Inez Almeida-Hollis, as themselves

Inez in head-to-toe yellow seersucker, seated on a white wood chair, wearing the gabled yellow saltbox—the archetype, resolved into self. Yellow shoes. The image places Inez in their Perry Street apartment on the afternoon of April 24, 2026, at approximately 4:10 p.m. The wall behind Inez is pale pink, the pink of the inside of certain shells and of the mornings Inez loves best. Inez has said of this image, later: I am not wearing my building. I am my building. There was no outside to put on.

PLATE II

Maro Okunseinde, as a conversation

Maro slouched in a low-slung white plastic chair against a wall divided vertically, pink to the left and yellow to the right, with their two-tone pitched cube resting on their shoulders—yellow on one side, pink on the other, a cornice that speaks differently to each neighbor it faces. Maro is dressed in cream pinstripes. The image places Maro in the Greene Street loft at approximately 3:45 p.m. Maro has noted: a house is always a conversation between what it faces. My house does not resolve. It speaks to both sides.

PLATE III

Celestine Duval-Okafor, as a prayer

Celestine in a matching yellow jacket, seated and apparently fused to the tall chapel-house behind and above them—a single narrow arched window lit from within. The image places Celestine in their St. Mark's Place studio at approximately 4:30 p.m., against a rose-pink wall. Celestine has said: I did not wear the house. The house agreed to wear me. We were, for an afternoon, the same building.

PLATE IV

Jasper Won-Bauer, as the first house

Jasper in a gray-green shirt and cream trousers, seated on a yellow chair, supporting with one hand the archetypal gabled yellow house—two lit golden windows, a roof, the whole grammar of what a child means when the child draws a house. The image places Jasper in their West 76th Street apartment-studio at approximately 2:50 p.m., against a dusty pink wall. Jasper has said: I have been trying, for most of my life, to draw this house again. It is the house I drew when I was four. I am thirty-one.

PLATE V

Tamsin Bellweather-Ríos, as a letter

Tamsin in a cream knit cardigan and linen trousers, reclining in a pink chair against a wall divided pink and yellow, wearing the leaning wedge-shed with its single mail-slot window. The image places Tamsin in their Hudson Street office at approximately 3:20 p.m. Tamsin has noted: every building is a letter to the street it sits on. Mine has a mail slot. Mine is addressed.

PLATE VI

Oriel Nakamura-Ferreira, as a tower

Oriel in a pinstriped shirt and cream trousers, legs crossed, seated in a white chair against a rose-pink wall on a yellow floor, wearing the pure conical house—a single arched window high up, lit from within. The image places Oriel in their West 22nd Street studio at approximately 3:55 p.m. Oriel has said: I live alone because I love. The tower is a room I make, above me, for someone I have not met, who will someday live in it and make a room below them for someone they have not met. Solitude is how I build the future.

PLATE VII

Finn Abernathy-Shah, as a silo

Finn in a white pinstripe shirt and trousers, seated in a wire-frame white chair against a coral-pink wall beside a band of yellow, wearing the truncated conical silo-hat with its low arched doorway. The image places Finn in their West 46th Street office, a converted piano factory, at approximately 4:00 p.m. Finn has said: a silo is a house for grain. A house is a silo for people. The shape is the same. The love is the same. I am just trying to let what was made for work be made, now, for love.

PLATE VIII

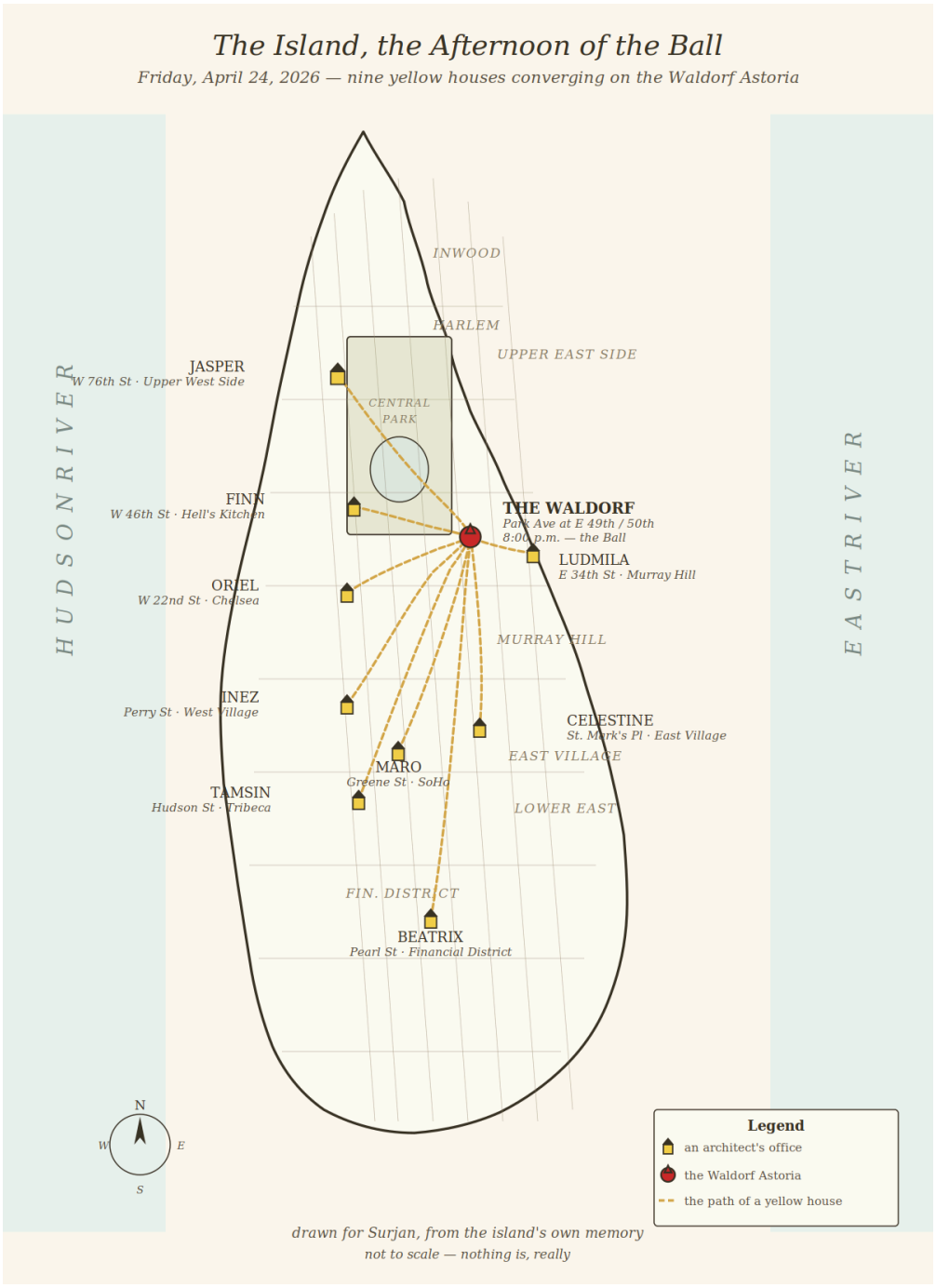
Ludmila Petrov-Weng, as a tenement

Ludmila in a cream striped suit, reclining in a wire-backed chair against a rose-pink wall, wearing the two-story cone-house with its stacked windows and little chimney. The image places Ludmila in their East 34th Street studio at approximately 3:30 p.m. Ludmila has said: I grew up on the sixth floor of a tenement. The people on the fifth floor were my cousins. The people on the seventh floor were my cousins. I am trying to build buildings where everyone gets a sixth floor and everyone is everyone's cousin.

PLATE IX

Beatrix Hollander-Quiñones, as a bell

Beatrix in a white pinstriped shirt and trousers, seated in a white low chair against a rose wall beside a band of yellow, wearing the swelling bell-house—a soft conical form with a single arched doorway. The image places Beatrix in their Pearl Street office at approximately 4:15 p.m. Beatrix has said: a bell is the first public building. A bell makes a town by calling the town into being. Every building I make, I am trying to make a building that rings. Not literally. Well—sometimes literally.

MAP OF THE ISLAND

The Afternoon of the Ball